QUESTIONS OF THE MONTH: Do you think you are going to have a better bloom season than usual this year? Do you think it might be due to the unusually cold winter that we had this year?

This subject was brought up on one of the Epi Chat lines where the moderator said that over the years, he had read several discussions on this subject. I too have read these discussions and found that they were usually written by someone in an area that had cold winter weather and didn’t have any choice but to bring their plants in the house or basement and put their plants in a state of dormancy during the winter. I have usually shrugged off the idea of putting plants into dormancy and thought it didn’t apply to southern California.

I have lived in my house for 39 years. In all of those years, I have never had frost although one or two times the temperatures have gotten down to 36 degrees. I have never felt that my plants went into dormancy. I water them during the winter (if we don’t have rain) and I apply a low nitrogen fertilizer on them during the winter. I have flowers almost every month of the year, including the winter months. When I was really able to take care of my plants, I had as many or more flowers than anyone else in this area. I routinely won the top trophies at most of the shows until I got to the point that I thought I might be discouraging other epi people to compete in our shows. With that in mind, I decided not to compete anymore.

I happen to think that we should look at the ancestors of our hybrids. Since most of the hybrids are most closely related to the Disocactus species, we should keep in mind that were these plants come from. Most of the Disocactus grow in the mountainous area of Mexico where it might get cold during the winter but not for long periods of time. I wonder if these plants actually go through a dormancy period. For those hybrids that do have some Disocactus crenatus in them, you must consider that D. crenatus is found in the lowland tropics that seldom sees any cold weather. There are more factors than just cold weather that might put these plants into dormancy. The frequency of rain in Mexico can be very seasonal. Long period of drought might force a plant into dormancy. Most growers that bring their plants into a protected area (house, basement or greenhouse) also give these plants very little water during this period. Perhaps that might force the plants to bloom.

Although many of our members are reporting a lot of buds this spring, I have fewer buds than usual. They may come later but at this moment, I won’t have very many flowers for the shows. Or maybe it will be like last year when I didn’t have very many flowers until the end of May and even into June.

To give you the other side of this discussion, Jean Gray (formerly of Gray/Davis Epiphyllums) wrote: “We learned from experience that [epies] won’t flower at all if [the temperature] doesn’t get below 40 degrees. The first year, when we had almost all of the plants sitting outside with no protection, we lost over 1000 plants. The next year, we had them all in the shade houses with plastic covering and butane heaters with thermostats. We set the heaters at 40 degrees and didn’t get any flowers that year. After that, we set the thermostats at 34 degrees and had much better luck with the blooming.” She reports that they have a lot of buds now and things that they might have an exceptional bloom period if they don’t get hot weather that causes bud drop.
Editor's note: Dick Kohlschreiber lives in San Pedro, CA. Gray/Davis Nursery was located in Lakeside, CA. Species names have been updated to current usage. Temperature is in degrees Fahrenheit.