

HELIA BRAVO-HOLLIS BIOGRAPHY

Chuck Staples, CSSA Historian

Bravo-Hollis, Dr. Helia (1901–2001)—discoverer, describer and scholar of taxa of Cactaceae in Mexico—one of the founders of Sociedad Mexicana de Cactología (Mexican Cactus Society) in 1951.



Born in Villa de Mixcoac near Mexico City, Mexico, on 30 September 1901, Helia Bravo-Hollis became a botanist, taxonomist and cactus researcher. Helia obtained the degree of Master of Science (MS) from the College of Philosophy and Letters at Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM), Mexico City, Mexico in 1931. Her thesis for this degree was '*Contribution to the knowledge of the cactus of Tehuacán, Puebla*'. She received an honorary doctorate from UNAM in 1985.

Helia joined the teaching faculty at the National Preparatory School as a teaching assistant and later as a professor. By 1956 she became a professor of botany at UNAM—later in 1965 director of the botanical garden at UNAM—during the rest of her working life.

Helia was one of the founders of the Mexican Cactus Society in 1951—along with Carlos Chávez, Dudley Blackburn Gold (1897–1990), Jorge Meyrán (1918–), Eizi Matuda (1894–1978), and Hernando Sanchez-Mejorada (1926–1988) Helia was its president from 1951 to 1972—Hernando from 1972 until his death in 1988. These cactologists explored extensively in Mexico together and individually, and with other cactologists such as George Edmund Lindsay (1916–2002) and Thomas Baillie MacDougall (1896–1973).

Among the number of cactus books by Helia, this one stands out: **Las Cactaceas de México** in Spanish with over 700 pages in 1937. This book was updated 1978–91 by Helia, in collaboration with Hernando, in 3 volumes of over 1800 pages in total. She has published over 150 articles, many of them in *Cactaceasy Suculentas Mexicanas*, the journal of the Mexican Cactus Society of which she had been a long time member.

One genus *Heliabravo* was named in Helia's honor by Curt Backeberg (1894–1966) in 1956; however, this genus later became a synonym of *Polaskia* that was described by C Backeberg in 1949. Helia is credited with describing two genera, *Backebergia* in 1953 and *Pseudomitrocereus* (w Franz Buxbaum (1900–1979)) in 1961; however, both became synonyms of *Pachycereus*. If interested you might look at 'A Brief History of *Pachycereus militaris*' under Other Histories, Plants, on the face page of CSSA Archives that includes what happened to the genus *Backebergia*.

A couple of species of cacti have been named in Helia's honor: *Ariocarpus bravoanus* and *Opuntia bravoana*. She has discovered and described a number of cactus plants.

Honors given to Helio Bravo-Hollis from:

1. Cactus and Succulent Society of America, Inc (CSSA): Fellow award in 1941 for *author of 'Las Cactaceas de Mexico' and othe publications.*
2. International Organization for Succulent Plant Study (IOS): Cactus d'Or award in 1980 (2nd awardee from IOS) for *her research in the country of origin that has contributed to the extension of knowledge of succulent plants.*
3. UNAM: *Jardin del Desierto Helia Bravo*, named in her honor for the desert section of the Jardín Botánico.

Although the Mexican Cactus Society had planned a celebration for her 100th birthday on 30 September 2001, Helia Bravo-Hollis passed away unexpectedly, 4 days early from becoming a centenarian, on 26 September 2001.

References:

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