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Crassula ovata
Tolkien Group

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***Crassula ovata* Tolkien Group**

The Jade Tree, *Crassula ovata*, is a popular, bonsai-like species that has a number of attractive cultivars. However, rather more odd than attractive is a form in which the leaves become cylindrical with a pronounced indentation at their tips. It is a plant which frequently bears branches that revert to normal, or develop different shaped or different sized leaves, and some have deep red colours, especially at the tips. This chameleon seems to change its form readily and the mutated branches can be easily propagated to produce a new cultivar. Many of these now bear cultivar names, mostly unestablished, and, being infinitely variable, the correct application of such names is tricky if they don't come with an established pedigree. They could theoretically all be called by a single cultivar name as suggested by Rowley (2003: 151), but that is unlikely to satisfy the need to distinguish the most interesting forms. So it is proposed here to give them a collective Group name, as follows:

***Crassula ovata* Tolkien Group** (Established here)

Origin:

A mutation from the species *Crassula ovata*, arising in cultivation prior to 1980 and changing randomly since then. It has been said to be a hybrid with *Crassula lactea*, but that is very unlikely. The cause is most likely to be a mycoplasma, which are immobile bacteria with no cell walls, causing a mutation of normal *Crassula ovata*.

Description:

Leaves cylindrical, terete or variously flattened, a result of leaves inrolling and fusing together. Leaf-tips more or less sunk at the tip in the form of an elliptic, mostly oblique umbilicus, or with a lenticular dimple just below the tip. Usually of a lively strong glossy green, or more rarely bright red, mainly at the tips or margins. Smaller than the normal species and seldom rising to more than about 30cm in height. Prone to producing frequent reversions to normal stems.

Etymology:

The first two cultivars comprising this Group were named after characters in the Tolkien *Legendarium*. The fictitious characters of J. R. R. Tolkien's series of children's high fantasy books, the first of which was published in 1937 entitled *The hobbit*, the best-seller 3-volume *Lord of the rings trilogy* (1954-55), and collectively known as Tolkien's *Legendarium*, have now given their names to the earliest two selections within this Group. By chance, Helmut R. Tölken (1939-), not as far as we know related, had published his thesis of a revision of the *Crassulaceae* in 1977, and the

coincidental similarity of the two names Tölken and Tolkien may have also played a part in making this choice for a mutation of a popular *Crassula*.

The two names are:

'Hobbit' appears to have been the earliest name to have received a description, in the *Abbey Garden Cacti & Succulents Catalogue* (1979), as *Crassula portulacea* 'Hobit' [this mis-spelling is a correctable unintentional error for 'Hobbit']. There is a description but no illustration (nor in later catalogues). Here the leaves are rolled back at all edges to form a slightly flattened cylinder and there is a lens-shaped dimple just below most leaf tips is the only free part that remains. According to Tolkien, a hobbit is a 'hole-dweller'.

'Gollum' first appeared in print in the Grigsby Nursery Wish Book (1981). There is a description but no illustration in that particular catalogue, but one does appear in the 1982 edition. That is the largest, most vigorous and commonly seen form where the leaf tips are highly modified and deeply umbilicate.



Fig. 1 A typical Tolkien Group plant with a variety of leaf shapes, probably 'Gollum'. Leaves up to 3.5cm. long & 1.8cm. broad.

Other mutations appearing elsewhere have received names that are not related to the Tolkien characters, and names in current usage belonging to this Group (not necessarily distinct) include the following seven names:

'Convoluta'
'Coral'
'Red Coral'
'Gollum Dwarf''
'Ladyfingers'
'Red Hobbit'
'Skinny Fingers'

'Gollum Dwarf'' and 'Red Hobbit' are notable for the addition of red colouring, while 'Ladyfingers' and 'Skinny Fingers' have more slender leaves.



Fig. 2 Three stems belonging to 'Hobbit' (left), 'Gollum' (middle) & 'Ladyfingers' (right). Photo: Noelene Tomlinson.

Literature:

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- Rowley, G. D. (2003) *Crassula. A grower's guide*. Cactus & Co., Venegono sup. (Va), Italy.
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