

# British Cactus & Succulent Society

## Southampton & District Branch Newsletter

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## Editorial

The clocks changed last weekend and the spring equinox has passed, so the days are getting noticeably longer and also warmer. I hope you have all started to water your plants and are seeing some signs of awakening from the long winter rest.

## Announcements

Portsmouth branch have made a few changes to their programme of events and the Zone 11 page on our website has been updated to reflect these changes.

Next month we will have a **Cultivation & Propagation workshop**. These are popular with our membership and we would like to maximise participation by the members – so please read the article on page 5 to get an idea of what topics we hope to cover. And this year's free plant will also be handed out at that meeting!

## Last Month's Meeting

### ***Bulbs & Succulents in the Roggeveld & Knersvlakte***

Richard started by mentioning that he wasn't an expert in South African plants, but had become interested in them many years ago. The late Margaret Corina and husband David were both very keen on South African plants and Margaret had given him some Lachenalia bulbs once - these are from the hyacinth family. What he found interesting about these plants is that they tend to grow in the winter months when everything else that we

cultivate is dormant. Margaret was one of the founder members of an informal organisation called the Southern African bulb group, which holds meetings twice a year. He got involved with the group and helped on the committee and also became their newsletter editor. As a result of this, he was sent various bits of information, and it was because of this that he learnt that the Indigenous Bulb Society of South Africa (IBSA) was having a 3 day symposium, with a day of talks followed by field trips to look at plants in habitat. He thought to himself that this would be an ideal opportunity to see the plants in habitat and learning more about how they grow in the wild.

We saw a map titled "Succulent Karoo Biome" which showed the positions of Cape Town, Worcester, Sutherland, Vanrhynsdorp, and then a Google maps view with the locations of Richard's pictures plotted on it. The symposium was held in August/September and it was in a winter rainfall area. Around 40 people attended the symposium which was held at a health/conference centre called Goudini Spa at Rawsonville, and afterwards, 20 people travelled through to Sutherland and then Middelpos, a town which is halfway between Sutherland and Calvinia, but too small to appear on most maps. He went on two days of field trips there. He then went on to Nieuwoudtville and Vanrhynsdorp and visited the West Coast National Park before returning to Cape Town.

We start with some of the pictures from the trip and Richard mentioned he would show pictures taken up to Vanrhynsdorp. When at the symposium they travelled in a large bus and we saw a picture of this. There was no number plate on the bus - apparently when coming back from dinner the previous evening, the driver had bumped into a local animal which caused a dent and knocked the plate off. The people in the picture were wearing warm clothes - Richard mentioned it can be quite cold in some parts of the country. We saw pictures of the people walking off to explore and the weather did not look enthralling - it was quite cloudy. At Grootvlei the surrounding mountains were covered in clouds. This location was near the town of Tulbagh, which is also the name given to genera of mini-Amaryllis (Tulbaghia). We saw a red Gladiolus and another

one with lilac and yellow shades. There are lots of *Gladiolus* and *Iris* family plants in South Africa. We could also see the burnt shrubs in the background. Bush fires are a natural phenomenon in parts of South Africa and plants have evolved to cope with them. The fires clear much of vegetation, allowing bulbs – which are largely protected due to being in the ground - to grow and flourish for a while. Succulents don't mind sitting in desert areas or places with low rainfall, but they aren't going to like being burnt, so areas with the bulbs may not be a good place to find succulents, although later on he did find areas where both grew together. *Babiana* is in the iris family and has fan shaped pleated leaves. Their name is due to the fact that baboons eat the corms. We saw *Babianas* with yellow, lilac and pink flowers and they all seemed to have very contrasting colours for the anthers and stamens.

A plant of *Spiloxene* had narrow-petalled pale pink flowers with some brown and turquoise colouring - there's a whole range of bulbs which are not that easy to grow in cultivation. Many grow in boggy areas so you can try and look for sources of moisture. There are lots of daisies of course, but like mesembs they can be hard to identify – the featured flower might have been an *Arctotis*. Some of the plants were familiar because of things we grow in our gardens - he came across a wild species of *Nemesia*. With *Lachenalia*, we could see the hyacinth shape of the plant. One thing that's characteristic is that at the tip of the flower spike, there's often a sterile section where the flowers are incompletely formed - they may not have stamen or styles. A lot of the *Lachenalias* have spotted leaves, so they are quite attractive even when not in flower. *Pelargonium triste* had a stem a foot high and an umbel of pink flowers. The flowers of this species vary a lot in colour.

Richard mentioned he's interested in creepy crawlies so if he sees one, he will quickly take a picture of that since the insect might move away whereas the plants will still be there. We saw the caterpillar of a tiger moth and also a Satyrid butterfly (this is in same family as the Meadow brown and Speckled wood butterflies which you might see in this country). Commenting on the background, he mentioned that the ground here was very sandy and stony. *Drosera* (sundew) is a plant which grows in damp areas. Some of the ones here had larger flowers than the British ones. You could also see the sticky red hairs on the plant, which are used to trap insects. A *Crassula* was hard to identify. There were several species of *Oxalis* plants here and we saw the spirally arranged petals on buds yet to open and clover-like leaves. Some *Oxalis* have very different forms of leaves, almost like a miniature

palm tree. The orchid *Satyrium erectum* is not unlike some of the terrestrial orchids found in this country. We saw another *Pelargonium triste*, this one had paler flowers.

Winterfell Farm was the second area they went to. You could again see burnt plants, so fire must have gone through here. There were grasses and restias and sedges growing here, but it wasn't easy to distinguish between them. We could again see how sandy the ground was. You can find little treasures all the time and we saw more *Babianas*. The flower on these was asymmetrical, with 6 petals - but there was different patterning on different petals. Richard mentioned there's a huge amount of variation in the superficial characteristics of the plants, and this can obscure the real ID of the plant. There are also other cases where flowers may look very similar but the plants are unrelated. This is an example of pollinator mimicry, where the plants make use of insects which may be here to visit other plants - some insects have an instinctive desire to visit flowers of a certain pattern or type, and other species can cash in on this. What botanists can do is dissect the flowers before they've even opened and group plants by using other characteristics.

Some *Moraeas* looks exactly like *Iris* and yet other *Moraeas* have flowers with 6 similar petals. We saw a red flowered example with a monkey beetle in the flower. These are incredibly spiny beetles and even their wing cases are spiky. They look for pollen and nectar and sometimes even eat the flowers. They seem to also use the flowers as meeting places where they congregate. Next we saw *Moraea ciliata* which does look like an *Iris*. However the leaves are not like typical fan-shaped *Iris* leaves. *Ferraria crispa* has very frilly petals and the centre of the flower is also frilled. A picture showed 3 different species all growing next to each other – a *Gladiolus*, a *Lachenalia* and an *Oxalis*. We saw more creepy crawlies - an amaryllis moth caterpillar with bold colours which was 3 inches long. Another one nearby was moulting and in the process of shedding its skin. This was actually on a mesemb with sparkly leaves and Richard wondered if this plant was *Mesembryanthemum crystallinum*.

Next was an interesting *gladiolus*, *Gladiolus ceresianus* with elongated flowers. The side petals were broad but the others were narrow, as if the picture had been edited. Another mesemb ("mesemb1") had crystalline deposits on the leaves and yellow flowers and "mesemb2" had different leaves and a pink flower with a midstripe. This location was about a mile outside Worcester and you could see traffic on the main road. A *Monsonia* had nice white flowers with crimson-pink edges -

they are a member of the Geraniaceae. We saw another *Ferraria* with the crinkly petals. "Mesemb 3" had flowers which were a deeper pink in colour and the leaf shape was also a little different from the earlier plants. There was a click beetle in one of the flowers. These have a mechanism whereby if they fall on their back, they can throw themselves up in the air and hopefully they will eventually land the correct way up.

Brandvlei Dam was 5km east of Rawsonville and they saw more mesembs here. The first had flowers similar to "Mesemb 3" but the next, "Mesemb 4" had white flowers and distinctly different leaves. They finished with the conference at Goudini Spa and a convoy set off north and towards Sutherland and the Roggeveld. They would be further away for inhabited areas. Roggeveld means "rye field", although Richard said that it was unlikely you could grow crops in such arid areas. They came to an area with masses of mesembs - you could hardly walk without stepping on them. The first mesemb had seed pods and was identified by Ian Acton as a *Cheiridopsis*. The next mesemb also had seed pods and stubbier leaves. Next was a *Senecio* with a yellow composite-type flower head. There was also a shrubby mesemb, the bushes often provided sheltered spots where other small plants can develop. A beetle (perhaps an *Arturium*) had a round shape, with ridges along its back. Stone grasshoppers are well camouflaged and they resemble the background scenery very well. *Romulea tortuosa* is also in the Iris family, but the flowers resemble a crocus. There is one in the UK called the Sand Crocus (*Romulea columna*) which is found in Devon, in the sand dunes around Dawlish Warren. A mesemb with pink flowers was identified as *Aloinopsis spathulata* by one of the experts with them, Alan Horstmann.

Continuing after the mid-meeting break, they were still in the Roggeveld, making their way up to Middelpos. He came across an interesting bulb, *Daubinya aurea*. This plant had red flowers, and it turns out the plant's name is due to the first discovered plants having yellow flowers. In practice, the majority of the population has red flowers. It has an unusual flower with separate florets grouped together. It is popular with monkey beetles. They now crossed from the Western Cape into the Northern Cape. There is no other town within 50 miles of Middelpos, so travellers often stay here. The name originated because it is midway between Sutherland and Calvinia, and people travelling between those two towns needed a resting spot. The town has grown up around the hotel. They were based at the hotel for 3 nights and made various tours, aided by the local experts. *Romulea*

*komsbergensis* was growing on the Komsberg, and is named after this mountain range. It has a striking pink flower with a dark patch and yellow centre and is related to crocus. It carpets the ground in some areas. Normally pink, it is occasionally seen as a white variant. Other species occurs in different colours. We saw an *Oxalis* and *Moraea* and *Romulea komsbergensis* growing next to each other. An interesting plant growing in the shade of a rock appeared to be *Eriospermum capense*. Some members of this genus have strange growths that come out of the leaves but this one just had hairy leaves. A different *Romulea* - *R. monadelpha* - had dull scarlet flowers and it seemed to be a meeting place for monkey beetles and they seemed to have eaten half the flower! We saw another Stone grasshopper - it was a different colour from the previous one we had seen, and it again matched the background rock very well. It was about 1½ inches long. Richard said he had seen them hopping around but he had not seen any fly.

*Aloinopsis acuta* had yellow flowers and it's an interesting species. It was thought to be lost in habitat, but plants were re-discovered recently. Richard said there must be large areas here that really haven't been explored by anyone. We saw the welcome sign for the Tankwa Karoo National Park. The Tankwa Karoo is a huge deep hollow in the ground, with the Roggeveld and Komsberg being surrounding escarpments. Looking over the terrain at Gannega Pass, one had an opportunity to look over the Karoo. The Cedarberg Mountains in the background were probably 30-40 miles away. It looked dry and hot, a bit like Death Valley. Once you finish admiring the view and look down at your feet, there are lots of shiny bright yellow flowers with glossy petals and these were on plants of *Cheiridopsis namaquensis*. This *Cheiridopsis* had shorter leaves than the one seen previously. A different mesemb had pink flowers with some similarities to the ones he had shown before. He saw some stumps growing from the ground and this appeared to be a dormant plant of *Tylecodon wallichii*. But was it alive or dead? Another specimen nearby was producing leaves at the top of the stems. This was doing well enough to have flowered previously, you could see remains of dead flowers on top of the stems.

IBSA have established a reserve here to protect the yellow-flowered plants of *Daubinya aurea* which are found here. The site is within a ranch belonging to a farmer, however there was a disconcerting sign at the ranch entrance saying "Trespassers will be prosecuted" along with a picture of a rifle. It seems that casual visitors were not welcome. It took a while for IBSA to establish the reserve because the

local farmer preferred to deal with someone speaking Afrikaans rather than English. We saw the plants of the yellow flowered *Daubenyia aurea* and these were doing quite well here. While you are on your hands and knees looking at these plants, you get the feeling that maybe you are not alone and Richard mentioned he saw a whole troop of baboons on a ridge, watching what the humans were doing. *Androcymbium burchellii* ssp. *pulchrum* is an interesting plant with bracts surrounding a central group of flowers. People who have look at this genus have detected similarities to *Colchicum* and so this plant has an alternate name *Colchicum coloratum* – the two very different names for the same plant being due to the rules of botanical naming precedence.

Moving on, with the trip to Middlepos completed, Richard set off for the north, travelling with Bill Squire, a person who had visited South Africa every year for 20 years. Bill had good knowledge of the local areas and where to look for plants. They left Middlepos and arrived at the Akkerendam Nature Reserve in Calvinia. There was a reservoir at the top which supplies the town. There is also a radio mast here. Richard read that a visitor once parked his car under the mast in winter, and found large icicles falling onto the car and creating dents. The mountain range in the background is the Hantamsberg - this extends to the north of the town. The geology of this area is such that there are bands of hard rock in between bands of soft rock, so after erosion, you sometimes get caps of hard rock on hills.

A mesemb with white flowers had shorter leaves than the ones seen before, due perhaps to the high light levels and the very dry conditions. Next was an Euphorbia with very attractive lime green bracts around the flowers. North of this area was the quiver tree forest, with large plants of *Aloe dichotoma* which were around 7 to 8 feet tall. The designation forest doesn't really match the density of the plants - they are very much scattered. They can look very stately if you get a nicely shaped plant. Following the recent revision of the genus *Aloe*, *Aloe dichotoma* is now called *Aloidendron dichotomum*. It also goes by the name of kokerboom and the quiver tree - the stems are hollow and can used to hold arrows, hence the latter name. We saw a row of 4 plants in a line - these must have been planted! Looking up in the top of one of these trees showed there were bird nests in there, probably weaver birds or something similar.

Now to the Knersvlakte, which has recently (2014) been designated as a nature reserve. Richard wanted to investigate a couple of areas, which he had been

told to go to and where he would be able to park and pay a fee to visit some areas - but he found this area was completely closed off. A picture showed shiny white areas on the ground and Richard explained these were areas containing small white quartz pebbles. Various theories exist regarding the name Knersvlakte - vlatke means flat area and kners is either a reference to the noise made by the wagons as their steel tyres went over the quartz pebbles – or the gnashing of teeth of the occupants of those same wagons! He found an area where there was some building work going on, and where the fence had been moved back, allowing access to see some of the plants. He found clumps of *Argyrodermas* and some had seed pods on them so it might be possible to identify the species from that. A strange dark-bodied plant was identified by Ben, Ian and Tom in the audience as the Bushman's candle – this is a *Sarcocaulon*. It didn't look alive but apparently they look like that when dormant.

He came across another area with more extensive areas of quartz pebbles. The reason these pebbles are here is that as the escarpment erodes, quartz is left over and after breaking into smaller pieces, it gets washed down and rolls down into the plains and accumulates. There were all sorts of nice things around and we saw mesembs and Conophytums. This was the first time he had seen a Conophytum in the wild and there were 9 green clumps in the picture. He came across a nicer clump with more heads – however it was a plain green colour and there were no flowers or seed pods to aid identification. *Dactyloopsis digitata* is one of the few mesembs which is easy to identify. It has leaves like little stubby fingers. The next plant was a strange mesemb – it had purple flowers and instead of producing one pair of leaves a year, it seemed to be producing 2-3 sets of leaves. Ben wondered if it was an Oophytum. Next was a *Crassula* with overlapping leaves, and small red/yellow flowers - it looked like *Crassula columnaris*. The next picture featured a special version of a Stone grasshopper – Richard called it the Knersvlakte limited edition – it was a wonderful white colour to match the quartz and it even had the pinky-grey blotches to match the grains in the pebbles – truly an impressive sight.

Richard ended with a few words about Bill Squire. When Richard joined the South African Bulb Group, Bill Squire had been the chairman. Just a year or two ago, he decided to start a new life with his girlfriend in Thailand, but sadly within a month of arriving in Thailand, he died just before he was going to get married. It was a sad story to end on. Richard dedicated his talk to Margaret Corina and to Bill.

Vinay Shah

## Table Show Results

At the March meeting, there were 21 entries in the table show, and 1 entry for "Plants in Flower".

	<b>Cacti – Opuntia</b>	<b>Succulents – Gasteria</b>
Open	(1) I Biddlecombe <i>Opuntia molfinoi</i>	(1) B Turner <i>Gasteria cv "Smokey"</i>
	(2) B Beckerleg <i>Opuntia invicta</i>	(2) I Biddlecombe <i>Gasteria glauca</i>
	(3) I Biddlecombe <i>Tephrocactus geometricus</i>	(3) M Stevenson <i>G. nitida v. armstrongii</i>
Intermediate	(1) G Penrose <i>Cumulopuntia subterranea ssp. pulcherrima</i>	(1) T Radford <i>Gasteria armstrongii</i>
	(2) I Biddlecombe <i>Tephrocactus bonnieae</i>	(2) M Stevenson <i>G. batesiana "Barberton"</i>
	(3) B Beckerleg <i>Opuntia clavata</i>	(3) B Beckerleg <i>G. pillansii v. ernesti-ruschii</i>

<b>Cacti/Succulent in Flower</b>
(1) B Beckerleg <i>Aloe longistyla</i>
(2) -
(3) -

*Ivor Biddlecombe*

## Branch Committee Meeting

A branch committee meeting was held on the 26<sup>th</sup> of March.

Branch finances remain healthy. David mentioned we've had more new members join the society and associate with our branch this year, and he hoped they would come along to our monthly meetings.

This is the 65<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Branch being formed, and Jane offered to bring in a cake to celebrate this, at the May meeting. The branch will also consider subsidising tickets for the Lullingstone Castle "CactusWorld LIVE" event in September.

Recent meetings were discussed. Arrangements for forthcoming meetings were also discussed, especially the Cultivation and Propagation meeting next month.

For the New Forest Show in July, David will not be available to organise our participation at the event this year, and no-one else on the Committee felt they could take over this work. As a result we will not have a display at that event. The committee will look at whether we can try to take part in other events and shows, to maintain our opportunities to make contact with the general public.

*Vinay Shah*

## Cultivation & Propagation Workshop

Our next meeting, to be held on Tuesday 7<sup>th</sup> May, is our 'Cultivation & Propagation Workshop'. This has now become the regular format at our May meeting each year, and it gives everyone the chance to join in and discuss a range of topics and issues relating to our hobby. As always, we will try to cover a selection of subjects, and if there is anything in particular that you think we ought to cover during the evening, please get in touch with David Neville as soon as possible.

One of the traditions of our Branch is that we give out a free plant to everyone each spring, and this year we will be distributing plants of a superb Mexican cactus: to find out which species it is, and to receive your plant, just come along to the May meeting! We have given away a good number of different species over the years, and once again in May, we would like everyone to bring along the plants they have received in the past, so that we can compare the ways in which we have each grown the plants, and discuss the merits of different growing techniques. As a reminder, the list of the species we have distributed in previous years is: *Echeveria lilacina* (2011), *Mammillaria albilanata* (2011), *Mammillaria microhelix* (2013), *Mammillaria glassii v ascensionis* (2014), *Frithia pulchra* (2015), *Euphorbia obesa* (2016), *Echeveria cuspidata v. zaragozae* (2017) and *Gymnocalycium stenopleurum* (2018).

Another regular feature of the May meeting is that we have a 'Swap Table', for people to swap and/or distribute seedlings, cuttings, offsets and leaves of any surplus plants that they have in their greenhouses. There is no charge for any of the items, so if you have any suitable plant material for the Swap Table, please bring it along and we will endeavour to find some new homes for your items.

We will have an introductory chat about our experiences over the winter, covering heating, greenhouse linings, minimum temperatures etc. Which types of succulent plants do you water in the

winter, and how much? As usual we will talk about any good compost brands, along with grits, and other materials we might add to our mix. With reports that the popular Tesco cat litter that we had previously recommended has been discontinued, what are the alternatives?

Richard White will discuss the basic requirements for healthy plant growth.

The range of pesticides available seems to reduce every year, so have you discovered any new products, and have you used SB Plant Invigorator to determine if it controls mealy bug? If you have found anything new, please bring it along to show everyone.

Bruce Beckerleg raises plants from seed and he will be bringing along some trays of seedlings, to explain what to do once the seedlings begin to germinate. If you have had success (or failure!) with seed-raising, why not bring along some of your pots or trays to show us?

If you have experienced problems with any plants, or have any plants without names, please bring them along and we will try to help you identify any problems, or name the plants for you.

Vinay Shah will talk a little about LED lighting options, for growing seedlings, or perhaps for growing mature plants in poor light conditions. He will also tell us a little about his concerns over a new polycarbonate roof that has been installed in his conservatory.

Ivor Biddlecombe will be bringing along a selection of plants that he has successfully grown outdoors, to expand on the discussion we had last year about hardy plants. If you have any potted plants that have survived outdoors during the winter, please bring them along.

These evenings have become very popular, and are most successful when everyone participates and contributes. Please bring along any items and plants relating to any of the subjects discussed above, to ensure that we have plenty of material on hand to stimulate debate and discussion.

*David Neville*

## Next Month's Meeting

Our next meeting will be held on 7<sup>th</sup> May and this will be a Cultivation & Propagation Workshop. Details of this event are described in the preceding article in this newsletter.

There is no table show for the May meeting.

## Forthcoming Events

Sat 13 <sup>th</sup> Apr	Isle of Wight	To be confirmed
Sat 20 <sup>th</sup> Apr	Portsmouth	Plant Auction
Sun 5 <sup>th</sup> May	Portsmouth	Visit to RHS Wisley (Mammillaria Show & AGM)
Tue 7 <sup>th</sup> May	Southampton	Cultivation & Propagation Workshop
Sat 11 <sup>th</sup> May	Isle of Wight	What I Did Last Winter - Paul Klaassen
Sat 18 <sup>th</sup> May	Portsmouth	Getting ready for the Summer Show - Cliff Thompson
Sat 1 <sup>st</sup> Jun	Portsmouth	Portsmouth Summer Show, Christ Church Hall, Widley, PO7 5AU
Tue 4 <sup>th</sup> Jun	Southampton	Columnar Cacti - Tony Mace
Sat 8 <sup>th</sup> Jun	Isle of Wight	To be confirmed - Rodney Sims
Sat 15 <sup>th</sup> Jun	Portsmouth	Seed Raising - Ian Woolnough
Sat 29 <sup>th</sup> Jun	Southampton	visit to South West Cactus Mart, Portishead Youth Centre, Bristol BS20 7DD
Tue 2 <sup>nd</sup> Jul	Southampton	Crassulas Everywhere - Derek Tribble

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