British Cactus & Succulent Society

Southampton & District Branch Newsletter

May 2011

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Editorial

By all accounts, April was a warm month, with hardly a trace of rain over the past three or four weeks. According to the BBC, it was the warmest April on record. David Neville and I have just returned from a 18 day holiday in Arizona/Utah and we only encountered one wet day out there. Anyway I hope this spell doesn't go on and turn into the 2-3 month dry period we had between May and July last year when I was constantly having to water the plants in the garden!

Since returning from Arizona, I haven't had time to do much in the conservatory, but currently, a few Rebutias and Mammillarias are flowering.

Announcements

Our branch will be taking part in 2 events in the coming month. The first will be the **Countryside Day at Sparsholt College,** on Saturday 14th May. The second will be a weekend display at **Hilliers Arboretum** at Ampfield, on 21st to 22nd May. If you would like to come along to assist at either of these events, please let David Neville know – for the former, if you have sale or display plants to bring along we may be able to get you a pass which will allow you to park closer to our stand.

Portsmouth Branch's **Summer Show** will be held at Cosham, on the 4th June. Show schedules listing the classes are available from the front table, and also from their website.

The Annual **Branch Dinner** will be held on the evening of Friday July 1st, and the venue will be te same as in recent years, namely the Luzborough Inn near Romsey. We would like an estimate of numbers so please let David Neville know if you would like to attend.

We would like to know if any members are willing to handle the **raffle** at our monthly meetings on a regular basis. If not, we will have to spread the task around volunteers.

The following notice was issued by David Kirkbright:
As you will all be aware Doug Donaldson from Kilnwood Nursery died late last year. His widow Doreen has now decided on the sale of his collection. The sale will be by auction which will take place on Sunday July 10th at her home which is the nursery premises in High Wycombe. There will be far too many plants to issue a full list but we will try to list some of the highlights and put up some photos on the BCSS Forum nearer the date.

At the recent Society AGM, **John Pilbeam** was elected as *President*, and **Alasdair Glen** was elected as *Chairman*. John will be speaking at our branch later this year.

Last Month's Meeting

Plants of Interest

There was some confusion last month with *Plants of Interest*. Dot England's plant of *Aeonium* cv. "Bronze Teacup" was overlooked because Ben Turner had also brought along some plants - a month earlier than planned! Dot's aeonium was a tall plant, a couple of feet high with golden-bronze leaves and bearing yellow flowers.

Ben had brought along a group of Aloes, which were all from Madagascar, with one exception – *Aloe humilis*, which comes from the Cape. This plant had been obtained from Holly Gate, and Ben was pleased that it was doing well and in flower with 2 spikes of orange-red flowers.

Aloe rauhii and in particular the cultivar "Snowflake" is worth growing because of the striking leaf markings, which are specks of white on a green background. *Aloe haworthioides* is a choice plant which forms clusters of small heads, as does *Aloe descoingsii*. Next was the grey leaved *Aloe*

parvula, and *A. bakeri*, which had been bought mislabelled as "Aloe vera" in France. The latter is said to come from sand dunes near Fort Dauphin. Ben said he uses the website www.desert-tropicals.com to look up names and other information about the species. Also, last year there was a list published in Bradleya of Aloe epithets and what/who they relate to.

Aloe deltoideodonta var. *candicans* had been obtained during his visit to the Copenhagen Botanic Gardens. *Aloe vaombe* had been obtained from Ian Acton, and the final plant was *Aloe suzannae*. These last two go on to make huge plants, which will eventually grow to some 8-10 feet tall.

Cultivation Workshop

David Neville started off the workshop with a discussion - how had everyone's plants survived the weather? Last year when we held a similar meeting, we thought that 2009's cold winter was perhaps a one-off but in the event we had another very harsh winter last year. Did anyone have any problems or difficulties? David said that surprisingly, his winter heating bill was no worse than the previous year but he had an issue with a circuit breaker which led to a couple of unheated nights in the greenhouse. Did anyone use electronic sensors to warn of low temperatures? Ben mentioned that his sensor unit (obtained from Maplins) did not work properly and he had heard a similar story from a member of the South African Bulb Group - he was interested to know if there were any reliable makes of electronic sensor. Alice said that signal from her sensor did not have sufficient range to reach her house.

Adrian mentioned that a thermostat was the solution to turn on the heating at a certain temperature - but this wouldn't work in the case of a power failure, which is what most people were worried about. I mentioned that there were electronic units which would sense remote temperatures and cause the receiver unit (in the house) to beep at you if a threshold temperature was reached. These units are usually battery powered and so would continue to operate even if the mains power failed. Adrian said that a tripping circuit breaker in the house could also potentially be advance warning of an issue in external heaters. Some people said their plants had survived the winter without any additional heating - Ivor mentioned that he had an *Agave victoriae-reginae* in a pot in his garden which had survived these past two winters. David said this Agave came from Northern Mexico and hence it is used to occasional low temperatures, but he was surprised that it had been able to withstand both the cold and wet.

David asked whether anyone has noticed that if you have a cracked pane of glass or a leakage and some of the plants receive a watering in the winter, those plants mostly survive (as long as the greenhouse is kept frost free) and tend to do better than the plants which aren't watered at all during the winter. Mark Jakins thought that plants which are healthy will survive but those that have already something already wrong with them are the ones that will tend to die. David said that Tony Morris from Leicester grows some of the most mature plants in the country but he had had lost two prize winning plants for no reason over the winter. Some plants do have a definite lifespan but most will grow on for as long as they are looked after. Also, Cliff Thompson has some magnificent plants and he does not heat his main collection. In fact, he keeps the vents open in the winter. He does not grow any tender species like Discocactus or Melocactus.

David asked whether everyone had watered their plants yet? Some people hadn't. David said that after visiting the Dutch nurseries and collections and seeing their plants all pumped up and growing while his collection was dry and dormant, he has now started watering from the middle of March. Some people prefer to start with a gentle spraying initially but he just gives everything a good dousing from the start. Mark said it was a lovely time of the year when everything looks dead and then a day or two later things have started to wake up after being watered. David said this is a time of the year when plants do make rapid growth once they get going, and a good time to do some repotting. Ben said he had prepared Carpobrotus cuttings before winter and they were doing well. Some of these grow outdoors in some of our warmer coastal areas. Alice mentioned that in the last 2-3 weeks, many of her Haworthias and mesembs have changed colours and turned to nice shades of dark red. This tends to happen as the plants react to the increased sunshine in spring. The plants go back to green when they restart growing.

David asked if anyone had problems with pests, specifically mealy bug? Malcolm mentioned he found a wine weevil wandering in the kitchen. What do people use for mealy bug? There are two or three forms of Provado around, but the form which comes as an aerosol spray was found to be quite effective. Bruce said he uses, but only on infected plants – it's too expensive to use on the whole collection as a preventative measure. Others mentioned that the spray erases the writing on plant labels, so make

sure you remove these before spraying! Alice mentioned that she used methylated spirits. Charlie mentioned that in the old days, nicotine and meths were popular treatments for pests. David said that Dimethoate had been removed from the retail market but it can be bought commercially in concentrated form, where it needs to be diluted to the rate of 8 millilitres in 10 litres of water. You have to wear a face mask and take adequate precautions when using insecticides of this potency.

Mark said that it was a problem to kill the insects and their eggs but he has used soap from Tescos and applies this when watering his plants. David said this was not recommended for plants like Echeverias which can scorch easily. Mark wasn't really sure how effective the soap was. Ted Smith mentioned carbon dioxide, which has had been used at Longleat to eradicate an infestation of Australian tick beetle. The infected plants are left in tents containing CO_2 for 3 days and this kills all the insects by suffocating them. The plants don't seem to mind since they use CO_2 anyway. Tom mentioned that there were places in Africa where there were naturally-occurring CO_2 pits, and animals which unwittingly wandered into these areas would die. For home use, an aquarium or tank filled with CO_2 might work since it is heavier than air and should stay put.

David ended the general discussion session and we turned to **Ivor Biddlecombe** for some tips on **seed raising**. For his seed-raising soil mix, he uses 3 parts of John Innes compost (the quality of JI varies, depending on the brand) mixed with one part of grit, and places this mixture into a 2" pot. The pot is then placed in a seed tray, where he would next pour boiling water into the tray, allowing it to soak into the soil in the pot. The hot water sterilises the soil, which goes dark when it is thoroughly soaked. He then uses a square wooden pad to press the soil down, and then sprinkles the seed onto a wedge shaped tray which is held above the pot, with the seeds eventually brushed onto the soil. He does not add a top dressing of grit since this doesn't work well for small seeds. He finally gives the pot a spray of water, which helps wash the seeds onto the soil. For bigger cactus seeds, he uses tweezers to manually plant the seeds. This is not a big job when you have 20 or so seeds in a pack. David said he just tears open the packet and taps the packet over the soil.

Ivor said that he found that plants grown on a windowsill sometimes did better than those in a propagator. He said that Lithops plants can flower in 2-3 years from seed, whereas some of the cacti take a lot longer and he wasn't quite sure how many more years of growing he had left in him!

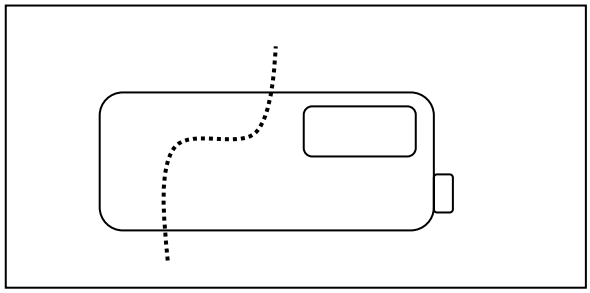
Once the seed is sown, the pot is put into a sealable polythene bag. With fresh seed, you can get close to 100% germination, and we saw green blobs in a pot, from seed sown a month earlier. Cacti seem to like a temperature change during the day – this seems to encourage better germination. Sometimes algae can form on the pots and this can turn into moss – this depends on the compost. He opens the bag when the seedlings get to a decent size and leaves the pot in the opened bag for another couple of weeks to harden the seedlings off. He mentioned that he starts sowing in March and continues through to June – this is when his Lithops plants have seed are ready for harvesting. In terms of light, he places the pots on a windowsill where they receive bright light from 10am to around 2pm. After the seeds germinate, he sometimes moves them to a cooler windowsill to avoid roasting the seedlings. In a greenhouse, temperature and lighting can be more extreme so he uses a screen to provide some shading.

He mentioned that the beauty of growing from seed is that you will get some variation amongst the young plants, so you can pick and choose which plants you grow on. As an example, we saw a potful of *Lithops dorotheae* (Cole #124) where every plant looked different. Despite their tiny size, Lithops seed can remain viable for several years after the seed is produced. But cacti seed is less viable and indeed his Frailea seed from the society did not produce anything this year.

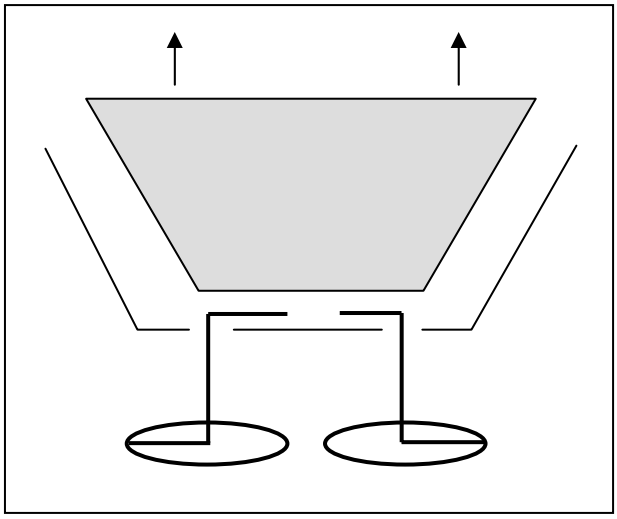
Just ahead of the tea break, David mentioned that members could help themselves to a plant each of **Mammillaria albilanata**, and **Echeveria lilacina**. The aim was for members to grow these plants on, and we would periodically ask everyone to bring them in so that we could compare how they were doing under the various growing conditions. Neither plant would get very large, but they would form nice specimens within a couple of years.

After the break, we had a session from **Glenn Finn** on **repotting**. He mentioned that he gave a similar talk four years ago, and at that time was challenged to repot a large Echinocereus plant. He managed to do this a few seconds inside the allotted time and was awarded the "Fastest Prickly Potter in the South" trophy, which had been hand-made by Ivor. He loves making things to help with the hobby and he showed us some metal tongs he had designed – these became a successful line and were even sold in quantity at Holly Gate. He also showed how plastic scoops can be made by cutting and using the top

part of a plastic milk bottle. These can be made in different sizes, and with different curves and profiles for scooping soil and gravel. The figure below shows how easy it is to make these scoops.



One other item Glenn showed was the "Cobra" springs which were designed to be inserted into the drainage holes at the bottom of a pot, to help remove a plant for repotting.



He removed a Gymnocalycium plant using the cobra, and said the next step was to tidy up the plant by removing any weeds and dead roots from the soil. In the new pot, he first put down a layer of gravel in the base. The soil for the plant was added next, along with the plant which was eased into position in the centre of the pot. Finally, top dressing was applied to give everything a neat appearance.

When it comes to larger plants, or those with large spines, he had previously used a net made from pieces from string to suspend the plant and lower it into the destination pot. He had now developed a simpler system using a couple of pieces of string and plastic sliders made from hollow tubing which were threaded onto the string. The plastic pieces were slid up to the neck of the plant (Glenn demonstrated the technique on a Ferocactus), and the plant could then be lifted with the string. Once the plant was in position, the sliders could be pulled off, and then the pieces of string could also be pulled out.

David asked, when repotting do you keep the old root ball - or do you tease the roots apart? It depends on what the plant is growing in. Peat is a problem to remove since the roots have usually merged into the peat - plants in a John Innes mix are easier to handle. David mentioned that Chris Anderson and her husband used to be major prize winners at local shows, and they repotted everything every year and cleaned the compost off the roots every time. They also fed Phostrogen to their plants and ended up with some amazing plants. Apparently, Bonsai growers also clean all the soil off the roots when they repot their plants.

The final session involved plant identification and problem plants. Ciprian had brought along a plant which David thought might be an Acanthocalycium or a Neoporteria since it appeared to have flowered around the shoulder. Given the form of the plant, Copiapoa might have been another possibility, but they flower from the crown. He thought the plant was possibly *Neoporteria paucicostata*. Next was something David described as a "TCP" or "turnip, carrot parsnip". This was the name used to describe such plants before Gordon Rowley invented the term "Caudiciform". The plant had tendrils and David thought it was therefore a cucurbit, perhaps a Gerrardanthus or a Kedrostris.

A pair of plants which looked quite brown were formerly part of Dave Philip's collection. David thought they might be *Mammillaria klissingiana*. The plants were already quite old – but needed to be grown on, and perhaps by 2020(!), they might become quite nice plants.

The next plant was falling to bits and Ben mentioned that the plant had been damaged by Tortrix moth or leaf cutter bees. David said the root was still firm so it should be potted up and it might go on to form a nice plant. He suggested that an investment in a badminton racket from the £ shop might be worthwhile since the bees hatch and come back to the same greenhouse. Another of Ben's plants - *Opuntia microdasys* - had orange spots on it. This is something that happens to the white and yellow spined forms of *O. microdasys* when the plants get too cold. The plant seemed to be a monstrose / cristate form. A *Mammillaria gracilis* plant wasn't worth saving and David suggested "chucking it out".

Klara's plant required naming. It was obviously a Gasteria, and David thought it was *Gasteria* cv. *"Little Warty"*. In answer to Klara's question, a cultivar is either a hybrid or a selected clone, named so as to distinguish it from the general population.

An Aloe had some bright green offsets and some reddish purple ones. Neither Ben or David were sure about the plant, although Ben volunteered the name *Aloe jucunda*. An Echeveria was identified as *E. pulvinata* cv. *"Ruby"* – this goes on to have fabulous orange flowers. An Agave might possibly be *A. parryi*. Many agaves look similar when young and they can only be identified when they have grown larger. David suggested that the plant was pot bound and could be moved into a larger pot.

A big Gymnocalycium plant was difficult to identify, and David suggested photographing the flowers and bring in the plant and the photo when John Pilbeam visited. The same advice applied to Sulcorebutias. John has written books on these species and along with the pictures of the flowers, should be able to identify them. Next was a Coryphantha, a genus which grows in Mexico, and Southern USA. The majority are slow growing. If it grew offsets, that would hide some of the scarring on the body, but some species remain solitary. Many look similar, so for positive identification, one really needs to know which area it came from. The plant might possibly be 25-30 years old.

The other genus which is impossible to name is Stenocactus - a couple of species can be identified but the others are hard to name, and some consider them to be just varieties. David said the featured plant was in need of fresh compost, since it should be close to flowering at this time of the year. Ben said the flowers which formed last year were violet/claret in colour, with a midstripe. David mentioned that John Pilbeam's book titled "Ariocarpus Etc." covered all the choice genera and might describe the plant. He thought it could possibly be *S. obvallatus*.

David ended the meeting by asking the audience to let him (or the committee) know if anyone had ideas for future cultivation meetings, or feedback for today's meeting.

Vinay Shah

Table Show Results

There were 21 entries in the April table show.

	Cacti – Rebutia	**Succulents – Echeveria**
Open	(1) B Beckerleg Weingartia corroana	(1) B Beckerleg Echeveria lilacina
	(2) T Grech Rebutia sp. cristate	(2) T Smith Echeveria sp.
	(3) T Smith Sulcorebutia sp.	(3) T Grech Echeveria lilacina
Intermediate	(1) B Beckerleg Rebutia heliosa	(1) B Beckerleg Echeveria lindsayana
	(2) T Smith Sulcorebutia tiraquensis	(2) A Jankovec Dudleya attenuata
	(3) T Smith Sulcorebutia albissima	(3) A Jankovec Echeveria sp.

Ivor Biddlecombe

Next Month's Meeting

The next meeting will be held on the 7th of June, and will feature Bob Potter talking about "The Island of Socotra". Some unusual and unique succulents originate from this region.

The June table Show will consist of the **Parodia** group (cacti) and the **Crassula** group (succulents). Please note that members can submit more than one entry in any of the classes, and that points will be earned for each placed entry.

The Parodia group contains *Parodia, Brasilicactus, Brasiliparodia, Eriocactus, Malacocarpus, Notocactus*, and *Wigginsia*.

The Crassula group is large and contains several subgroups (*Adromischus, Aeonium, Echeveria, Sedum* and *Semperivium*). Hence it includes many genera, such as *Adromischus, Bryophyllum, Cotyledon, Crassula, Kalanchoe, Rochea, Tylecodon, Aeonium, Greenovia and Monanthes, Echeveria, Dudleya, Graptopetalum, Pachyphytum, Tacitus, Sedum, Sempervivum* and *Jovibarba.*

A reminder for committee members that a branch committee meeting is due to be held on Monday 16th May.

Forthcoming Events

Sat 14th May	Isle of Wight	"Brazil" - Cliff Thompson
Sat 14th May	Sparsholt	Display / Plant Sales @ Sparsholt College (Countryside Day)
Mon 16th May	Southampton	Branch Committee Meeting
Sat 21st May	Portsmouth	"Gasterias in the Flesh" - Tony Roberts
Sat 21st May–Sun 22nd	Southampton	Display / Plant Sales @ Sir Harold Hillier Gardens, Ampfield
Sat 4th Jun	Portsmouth	Portsmouth Summer Show @ St Colman's Church Hall, Cosham
Tue 7th Jun	Southampton	"The Island of Socotra" - Bob Potter
Sat 11th Jun	Isle of Wight	"Patagonia" - Anna & Martin Sheader
Sat 18th Jun	Portsmouth	"Cotyledon, Adromischus, Tylecodon" - Derek Tribble
Fri 1st Jul	Southampton	Branch Dinner @ Luzborough Inn, near Romsey
Tue 5th Jul	Southampton	"Propagation of Cacti & Succulents" - Tony Roberts
Sat 9th Jul	Isle of Wight	to be confirmed - Paul Klaassen
Sat 16th Jul	Portsmouth	"What I did Last Winter" - Paul Klaassen"

Branch website: http://www.southampton.bcss.org.uk