

British Cactus & Succulent Society

Southampton & District Branch Newsletter

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Editorial

The weather has been pretty decent, at least as far as outdoor plants are concerned – we've had a good mix of warm sunny days interspersed with some rain in between. It's good to see everything awakening and putting on some good growth.

The plants in my conservatory are also responding to increased watering and the weather. Plants in flower include Rebutias, Mammillarias and Echeverias along with Gasterias, Aloes and Haworthias. While watering my plants I thought I saw something move behind me and assumed it was a spider, but a few minutes later I saw a small rat climbing over the plants! A "Tuffcat" rat trap loaded with peanut butter proved to be effective in catching 4 of them over the subsequent days!

Announcements

There are **sheets on the front table to fill in your name** if you are interested in going to the Haverling Cactus Mart (May 10th), or to other events in June. Please do remember to fill these in since we need to assess how many people want to go and this will help us to organise travel / lifts to the events.

Last Month's Meeting

Cultivation & Propagation Workshop

David started the meeting by asking if people had had problems with the windy weather earlier in the year. Sue Wilson mentioned that in Calshott, they lost a few panes of glass from their greenhouse, but luckily, no plants rotted due to water coming in. Dot mentioned polycarbonate sheets on the roof which had been tied down with rope and a bar flew into

their neighbour's garden. The weather also interfered with some of her window vents. Peter Down said Ian Acton lost some glass panes due to a bough falling from a neighbour's tree. David Neville said his dad had some old wooden decaying greenhouses, and a glass panel – 18 inches square - blew out from roof and they found it 60 feet down the garden. It must have flown like a Frisbee!

Now it's Spring, and time for the plants to come alive. David asked if everyone had started watering, and most people seemed to have. David said his greenhouses were packed with crates of plants in the gangways and he couldn't move around to water, especially since he was still recovering from his operation. He hoped to start soon. Bruce Beckerleg said he started in mid-March, which also happens to be the advice in an old book by Vera Higgins. David said that was about right – but the exact timing really depends on the weather. David said some plants re-absorb flower buds when you water early. Rebutias do this, as do Mammillarias and Echinocereus too. Mark Jakins said he started watering at the start of March. He had a couple of dozen plants out in the garden and only one had rotted - he thought it was mould which kills plants. David was surprised about this - most of the plants we tend to grow will have problems if left outdoors when temperatures reach freezing point.

Adrian Bailey asked about drainage - if there's standing water left after a day after watering, is that bad? He had tried putting gravel down in large trays and then placing pots on the gravel. David said it was common for people to use sand or gravel or capillary matting on a bench to spread the moisture. Richard said the problem with this approach was that the roots grow out from the base of the pot and root through and get tangled in the gravel. Mark said it was difficult to keep shelves clean and he uses vinyl offcuts from the carpet shop for lining and these are easy to clean. David thought plants did grow better if the pot was placed on a tray or saucer – it gives the plant extra time to soak up the water. This also depends on the compost – if you use a lot of grit and perlite, the plants can dry out too quickly. The white pieces of perlite can also be mistaken for mealy-bug by half-blind judges!

Next up was Ivor Bidlecombe to discuss how to harvest and use seed from your plants. He produces the packets of seeds which we sell at some of our shows. He passed round a covered tray containing pieces of seed pods to illustrate that the seeds are denser than the chaff and that a shake will make the seeds go to one side where you can separate them out. Rebutias are good – the seed is quite dry and easy to separate. He showed with *Gymnocalycium* seed how he uses a cardboard guide to pour the seed into transparent packets. These are the type used by stamp collectors and he had got several hundred of these from Margaret Corina a few years ago. Some seed like *Astrophytum* is actually delicate and can be damaged by improper handling - Alice mentioned that she had heard that seeds can get crushed by the post office sorting machines if not packed properly. Ivor discussed some of the other aids he uses - little stainless steel dishes to hold the seed and blotting paper or kitchen paper to dry seeds if they were wet or juicy. *Cleistocactus* seed has sticky pith – this needs to be dried off with blotting paper to prevent fungal infection. He places such seeds on the window sill and they are dry enough to handle within an hour. He also uses a special paintbrush, where the normal bristles have been replaced with bristles from a toothbrush which are stiffer and which help to clean the seeds. With *Lithops*, you have to put the seed capsules in water for the seeds to be released. Swirl the water and it's almost like panning for gold – the seed sticks to the side or sinks to the bottom. Washing the seeds like this doesn't affect viability – some of his seeds have germinated several years after being harvested.

When he sows seeds on a volcanic mixture, it has proved to be good for germination but is hard to keep wet/moist. He passed around a bag which had been sown on 12-Sep-2012 and where no moisture had been added, and two plants had survived that entire period. Dot asked whether he experienced problems with moss and algae – Ivor said he didn't really have issues. He passed around another pot with seed sown a week ago and we could see green blobs smaller than a pin head starting to come up. For his typical soil mix, he takes 3 pots of John Innes seed compost, and adds a pot of grit. He has tried various mixes over the years. Coarse vermiculite will do, but the horticultural grade vermiculite is finer. If taking cuttings, a 50-50 mix of peat and vermiculite is perfect. He got some *Adromischus* pieces at the Portsmouth Show and those cuttings have formed a lot of root without any effort using the vermiculite mix. And even poor-looking plants can be used to produce seeds - you can easily get 20 or more seeds from just one pod.

Before sowing seed, he puts some grit on top of the soil and then places the seeds and sprays with a mister which helps to push the seed off the grit onto the soil. The soil is pre-soaked in boiling water. He doesn't use a fungicide, and has never really had problems with damping off. A well-drained compost avoids problems. He places the pots in a sealed plastic bag, and after around 3 weeks, he opens the bag to let the air circulate. You don't want it to dry out so need to keep a watch. In his greenhouse he has a shaded area and it is best to avoid direct sun for 6 months or more. The plants can be left in the bag for longer periods – such as 6 months or a year. David Neville said that Ken Burke (of the Pete and Ken nursery in Canterbury) was a very good seed grower and he used to leave the seedlings in bags for 12 months.

Ivor showed us some plants at the next stage – these were *Lithops* which were two years old and some were even starting to flower. Growing from seeds can get you some nice variations, as illustrated with *Lithops salicola*. With his plants, he stops watering around November, but with seedlings, he keeps them moist all time - if they dry out they don't have the resources to cope, unlike mature plants. This watering of seedlings is usually only necessary in the first year, or until they are pricked out. With *Lithops* you can easily fill a tray from just a pot of seedlings. With young *Lithops*, they can make new bodies 2-3 times in their first year. Once the plants are big enough to handle, then they can be treated normally. The volcanic mix is very good for pricking out, the roots come out easily. With his soil mix, the roots are more fibrous. Just dip the roots in a dish of water and the roots will stick together and then you can use a dibber to make holes in the soil and replant them.

David said when he was producing plants by the thousand, he used to sow everything in pots housed in a propagator in January/February and aimed to prick all seedlings out into seed trays by June. He used hessian for shading, and with proper watering and feeding, the plants were 10-20mm in diameter by the end of the first season, and ready for sale at 18 months old. He found that he could leave seedlings alone - but the sooner you transplant them into a good compost, the more quickly they'll grow. He used Chempak / Tomorite for feed. He also tended to use Levingtons compost - the cheaper ones are not as good. He also found that the more peat you have in the compost, the more prone it is to developing algae. Alice said she used inert cat litter mixed with grit and some compost.

A member from the audience asked about sciara fly. This can be a problem in peat based compost. David

said he used to use Diazinon granules which was fantastic, but it has been withdrawn from sale.

After the break, the discussion moved on to the plants which had been handed out by the branch in recent years and which members had brought in for comparison. These were the silvery/ grey *Echeveria lilacina*, *Mammillaria albilanata* which has nice short white spines and then last year, *Mammillaria microhelix*. David said all three plants are Mexican, and he would have to choose something non-Mexican next time!

We looked at the *E. lilacina* first – these were the most eye-catching of the three species. As time passes, there were even more difference between the plants. Sue Wilson's plant remained the largest – it was producing flower stems and was now offsetting, although usually this species produced just a few offsets. Close behind was Bruce's which weighed next to nothing – it hadn't been watered and was growing in a peat based compost. The problem with *Echeverias* is that as they grow they can hang over the side of the pot and can suffer leaf damage as a result. Sue's was protected by the diameter of her pot but Bruce's was overhanging and the leaves can get damaged or marked, especially if the plant is moved around.

Another plant seemed to be suffering – the centre had healthy new leaves, but the rest of the plant looked anaemic. It was Ben's and he said it was ok until last autumn. It had healthy roots last year when repotted. Another plant had very open growth and was probably not getting enough light. It also seemed to have lost the growing point. Mark mentioned it was an offset from the main plant. The next specimen promoted David to comment "someone seems to have gone into the propagation business". Dot mentioned she had got drips of water onto the plant in her greenhouse and this made it go mouldy, but she rescued and repotted 5 heads. Two of these had rooted already. David mentioned that when taking cuttings, don't use the oldest leaves - use some of the middle aged or younger ones. Mike West said he though his plant had no "bloom" on the leaves. David said there was some there, but it might be thin. The best shape and colour is achieved in the best light. Dot asked if heat was a problem and David thought it wouldn't be a problem as long as there was ventilation.

Mammillarias are much slower growing and *M. albilanata* is slower than many mamms. The largest pots were 3½" inch pots and none of the plants were tennis-ball sized yet. There was again a large variation in the plants. Some were very short spined and others had long central spines. A typical plant

with short tight spination and a nice printed label was eye-catching – it was Ben's. Another one had lots of wool. Out of the 9 plants, only one was in flower, and this was Alice's, who doesn't usually grow cacti. She said she just left it all alone on the top shelf and ignored it. Another plant had a red seed pod on it. And another one also had a seed pod, but also some mealy bug. Another one did not seem to be getting enough light - the ones in full light stay nice and compact, but if the plant does not get enough light, then the plant's shape will be affected.

Last year's plant was *M. microhelix*. David said this goes under two names – *M. microhelix* and *M. microheliopsis*, but the only difference is the flower colour of yellow versus pink, and you tend to get a mixture of both plants from one seed pod. These were originally in 2 inch pots so most had grown on, although one had grown a lot more – it was Bruce's and had apparently been dripped on and just kept growing. Alice's plant was small in size but it was the most strongly spined one, and was flowering. *M. microhelix* is related to *M. elongata* which grows much more quickly. A clump of this in a 6 inch pot will form a big plant eventually. Another plant perhaps getting a low amount of light was open and pale on top versus another one which was nice and compact and dense. One of the plants was starting to offset and next year it might be the biggest of these plants.

Next was some discussion on lighting. Last year Adrian had showed us his wooden light box with tube lights and I had brought along an example of an LED light fixture specifically for plants which was being sold on Ebay. There are lots of lighting solutions out there but this is one of the more common designs, with a metal square frame housing a matrix of LED lamps. The common version is fitted with blue and red LEDs. In nature plants are green because that's a colour that the plant does not actually need and which the plant can reflect. White light contains a mix of wavelengths (as in a rainbow) so using white light means you are wasting some of the light energy because it will be at wavelengths the plant does not need.

These LED lights are an attempt to give the plant just the specific colours that it needs. The seller who sells this fixture had a whole list of supposed benefits but it's hard to know if all the claims are true. The fixture cost £16 or £17 - and there are 3-4 different designs on sale - this uses 14 watts of energy and has a mixture of red, blue, orange and white LEDs, almost in a union jack layout. When I received it, it was making a rattling sound and I found that one of the internal screws had worked its way loose. It was supposed to illuminate a 5 foot

area but the light didn't seem to be diverging that much at all. Adrian mentioned another design he had seen which had fans to cool the LEDs and indeed higher powered lights will need some cooling. Adrian asked about what separation should be used between the light and the plants and I expected that 2-3 feet might be about right. Richard suggested the light intensity could be measured using a meter or perhaps a camera. David said that most commercial nurseries which use artificial lighting position the lights at a height of a few feet.

Next was Alice Jankovec, on the subject of growing plants from seeds. She grows mainly succulents and has been doing this for a few years now. She uses Ivor's methods, with a single pot in a plastic bag and boiling water etc. The compost mix is sieved cat litter which is better for mesembs. David Neville suggested the use of Tesco's low dust lightweight cat litter, or Sophisticat cat litter – don't use other types. Alice said she also used another one from Pets at Home which was sold in 30 litre bags, but this had a much bigger variation in pellet size and was more suited to larger plants. She tends to overwater plants so using this mix is better. She mixed with seed and cutting compost and grit, and sieve's it, using the finer material. She found a convenient scoop in a bag of dog food. When the seeds germinate, she tops them with this compost to cover the root and stem, and it helps to prevent the plant from drying out. Sometimes the seeds germinate upside down and may need to be righted. She gets almost 100% success with this. Ivor said when he used to sow Euphorbias, he found that vermiculite worked well with the large seed. After 3-4 months, she pricks them out into polystyrene boxes using the same mix as the seedlings and that seems to hold enough moisture. She can judge the amount of moisture by the colour of the potting mix.

She pricks the plants out as soon as they can be handled. The polystyrene boxes should help keep the temperatures even – in winter it should keep the seedlings warmer and in the summer it should stop them from overheating. Last year she had 700 seedlings. She keeps them on the bottom shelf over winter, in a shaded part of the greenhouse. They get a reasonable amount of light but won't get sunburnt. She waters them on and off through the winter - with the mesembs, you want to keep them going all through the year. The mix she uses is 50% cat litter, 25% compost and 25% grit. For seedlings she uses liquid cactus feed. With mesembs, once they germinate and are big enough to have the bag open – she rinses them out at regular intervals. This involves putting them in a tray of water and letting them absorb the water and then moving the pot to a dry tray to drain. This advice was provided by a

South African seed supplier – it seems to help the seedlings jump in growth each time. She said she only did the rinse after the seedlings were big enough for the bags to be opened. It prevents mineral build up in the soil. As for watering, she initially uses tap water when the seedlings are indoors, but once they are in the greenhouse, she uses rain water,

Moving on, David mentioned he had attempted to name some of the plants that had been brought in for identification. There were also some cuttings of *Stapelia variegata* which had been brought in, and he asked the audience to help themselves.

Next was Bruce discussing the topic of Haworthia pollination. When he was a nurseryman, he used to buy Haworthia seed, but found that the seed was not very good quality and it was expensive. So he wanted to set his own seed. He also wanted to propagate choice species which did not offset. He started off with *Haworthia truncata* and was not very successful. It tends to flower in November when it is cold and gloomy. Like any other plant if you want to set seed, it should ideally be nice and warm and sunny. He moved the plants to a south-facing windowsill inside the house, and this also helped him to remember to check the flowers regularly. He had 3 clones, and 2 of them seem to very reluctant to set seed – you sometimes find this with Haworthias. The other problem is that a regular paintbrush just can't make it into the narrow tube of the flower. Some people take the flower apart, but he tends to modify the paintbrush, removing all except 3 of the bristles, and that is enough to get into the flower. The plants are not self fertile - so you have to cross different plants. The pollen is near the top of the flower opening and the stigmas are lower in the flower. You need two plants at a similar stage of flowering. David mentioned some flowers are not receptive when they first open. Two plants from two different sources should be able to set seed, but cuttings from the same source will not.

For the final part of the meeting, David had asked people to bring in plants in bud or flower. A Sansevieria coming into flower was flowering from the crown - some flower from the base. It was a nice nice spikey plant and you could smell the nectar even though the flowers have not yet opened. A mixed tray of mesembs in flower had been brought in by Mark. David mentioned there were some different things in there – the flowers are very samey but are produced in profusion and in different colours and shapes and textures, and also in the winter. Some are even scented. *Crassula* cv. "Morgan's Beauty" forms miniature pink flowers. This was a small specimen, but a large clump can

produce a spectacular show. He has trouble with in the winter, when botrytis can spread. *Crassula* cv. "Buddha's Temple" is another *Crassula* cultivar. It is also terminal flowering – the stems stop growing after flowering, but it will produce offsets. Once it flowers you have these stumps of dead branches. It's a very popular plant and probably sells a couple of hundred every year.

Amongst the plants were 2 plants of *Mammillaria* (*Mamilopsis*) *senilis*. This plant has white spines and striking red flowers which contrast well with the glistening spines. If you have a sunny greenhouse, the buds form on the sunny side. It grows at high altitudes in Mexico. It is one of the first plants to form buds and flower each year. There is a white flowered form which he got hold of - but it's not as impressive. Another of the large flowered mamms is *M. longiflora* v *stampferi*. This is the short tubed form and it is very spectacular, when compared to the smaller flowered *Mammillarias*. The flowers don't tend to vary much amongst Aloes - most are orangey pink – and this was *Aloe variegata* which almost everybody must have grown. It is still one of his favourites. It is not a hard plant to grow – but it is hard to grow it well and to get it to a decent size. It soon starts to sucker. Most of the Aloes flower in the winter, and it is nice to have some colour in the greenhouse at that time. *Gasterias* also produce nice flowers. Some, such as *Gasteria croucheri* can produce flower spikes several feet tall. This was *Gasteria baylissiana* which had dainty short flower stems. *Gasteria* flowers have a swollen rounded belly and he's even cut the flowers and taken them inside for display in a vase – they can last a couple of weeks. *Eriosyce gerocephala* has bicoloured flowers which are purple pink with a white base, almost as if on fire. *M. albilanata* ssp. *tegelbergiana* is bigger and stronger growing than the plants we had seen earlier.

Having run out of time, the meeting finished here. David hoped that people had enjoyed the meeting – and asked for the members to provide some feedback and ideas on what they would like to see covered at future cultivation meetings.

Vinay Shah

Table Show Results

There were 15 entries in the April table show.

	Cacti – Rebutia	Succulents – Echeveria
Open	(1) T Smith <i>Rebutia hoffmanniana</i>	(1) B Beckerleg <i>Dudleya</i> sp.
	(2) B Beckerleg <i>Weingartia correana</i>	(2) B Turner <i>Echeveria rammette</i>
	(3) I Biddlecombe <i>Rebutia</i> cv "Bo Jangles"	(3) M Shaw <i>Echeveria gilva</i>
Intermediate	(1) B Beckerleg <i>Sulcorebutia aremacea</i>	(1) B Beckerleg <i>Dudleya pachyphytum</i>
	(2) T Smith <i>Rebutia rauschii</i>	(2) S. Wilson <i>Echeveria rammette</i>
	(3) I Biddlecombe <i>Rebutia</i> cv. "Phoebe"	(3) I Biddlecombe <i>Echeveria laui</i>

Ivor Biddlecombe

Bookwork Corner

The cacti house is looking lovely and very colourful at the moment with a flurry of plants flowering. At their best are *Mammillaria* and *Thelocactus*. Other species flowering are *Echeverias* and *Turbinicarpus*, with a few *Rebutias* coming into flower.

My *Sanservieria parva* is now in full bottle brush flower with an overwhelming strong perfume being emitted in the evening. *S. stuckyi* by comparison had tiny flowers with no scent at all. I am still waiting for *S. francisii* and *S. trifasciata* 'Midnight Star' to finish expanding the buds and open up!

The starlings nesting under the roof at the back of the house and under the front porch are incredibly busy feeding noisy nestlings at the moment. A brood of house sparrows in ivy on the back of the house have just made their presence noticeable with loud demands for food.

The spring is my favourite time of year and seeing the bluebells, wood sorrel, wood anemones, cow parsley, hawthorn and apple blossom in addition to the fresh greens of the trees is my vision of heaven! The local cuckoo and nightingales have returned along with the common whitethroats so summer is just around the corner.

We now have a number of donated books for sale on the library table, these include: **Cactus Lexicon** (Backeberg 1976); **The Mammillaria Handbook** (Craig 1979); **The Encyclopaedia of Cacti** (Cullman, Gotz & Groner 1986); **The Illustrated Encyclopaedia of Cacti** (Innes &

Glass 1991); **The Cactus File Handbook 2-** Rebutia (Pilbeam 1997); **The Cactus File Handbook 6-** Mammillaria (Pilbeam 1999) and **Cacti for the Connoisseur** (Pilbeam 1987). Do come over and browse.

'ENJOYED THE LECTURE? THEN ENJOY THE BOOK!'

April

The annual cultivation workshop was held at the April meeting. Some relevant books include '**The New Haworthia Handbook**' (Bayer M.B.), this should be invaluable for anyone growing haworthias. The two titles by John Pilbeam, although now quite dated, are still a valuable read for newcomers in particular. These are '**How to care for your cacti**' and '**How to care for your succulents**'. Other books include '**The Complete book of cacti and succulents**' (Hewitt T.) and '**Cactus and succulents in the garden**' (Bell S.A.)

May

As its show time this month perhaps it's time to brush up on your preferred species so you can find that perfect plant in your collection! So this month take a look at the species specific books we have to offer in the library. To coincide with the classes in tonight's educational show we have *Class 1: Mammillaria* – see **Cactus File Handbook 6 – Mammillaria** (Pilbeam); *Class 3: Gymnocalycium – A Collector's Guide – Gymnocalycium* (Pilbeam) and **Gymnocalycium** (Charles); *Class 4: Rebutia – Cactus File Handbook 2 – Rebutia* (Pilbeam); *Class 7: Crassula – A Grower's Guide – Crassula* (Rowley); *Class 8: Haworthia - The New Haworthia Handbook* (Bayer) and **Haworthia and Astrolaba – a Collector's Guide** (Pilbeam) and finally *Class 9: Euphorbia – The Succulent Euphorbias – An Introduction* (Brewerton).

All of these books can be found in the **Featured Book Corner**, so do come over and have a look!

Sue Wilson

Next Month's Meeting

Our next meeting will be on 3rd June and this will feature a talk by Stuart Riley on new cactus and succulent hybrids – so there should be some interesting plants to see! Stuart usually also brings over an interesting mix of plants for sale.

The June Table Show will consist of the **Parodia** group (cacti) and the **Mesemb** 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 **Mesemb** family is large and includes over 120 genera, the names of which are listed in the Handbook of Shows. Plants belonging to the *Argyroderma*, *Cheiridopsis*, *Conophytum*, *Faucaria*, *Lithops* and *Nananthus* subgroups are allowed. Some of the more common eligible species include: *Argyroderma*, *Gibbaeum*, *Pleiospilos*, *Cheiridopsis*, *Conophytum*, *Ophthalmophyllum*, *Faucaria*, *Glottiphyllum*, *Lampranthus*, *Lithops*, *Trichodiadema*, *Aloinopsis*, *Fenestraria*, *Frithia*, and *Titanopsis*.

Forthcoming Events

Sat 10 th	May	Isle of Wight	Talk from Cliff Thompson
Sat 10 th	May	Southampton	Branch visit to Havering Cactus Mart, Romford, Essex
Sat 17 th	May	Portsmouth	Plants & Animals of Madagascar (Hazel Taylor)
Sat 17 th	May	Southampton	Display / Plant Sales @ Sparsholt College (Countryside Day)
Tue 3 rd	Jun	Southampton	New Cactus & Succulent Hybrids (Stuart Riley)
Sat 7 th	Jun	Portsmouth	Summer Show at St. Colman's Church Hall, Cosham, PO6 2JJ
Sat 14 th	Jun	Isle of Wight	Epiphyllums (Carl Bullock)
Sun 15 th	Jun	Southampton	Branch visit to RHS Wisley & Mammillaria Society Event
Sat 21 st	Jun	Portsmouth	Echinocereus (John Pilbeam)
Sun 22 nd	Jun	Southampton	Branch visit to Suzanne & Tony Mace's Collection
Sat 28 th	Jun	Southampton	Branch visit to Bristol Cactus Mart, Portishead, Bristol
Sat 28 th	Jun	Portsmouth	Display / Plant Sales @ Hayling Island Horticult. Society Show
Tue 1 st	Jul	Southampton	Nevada (David Minnion)
Sat 12 th	Jul	Isle of Wight	What I Did Last Winter (Paul Klaassen)
Sat 19 th	Jul	Portsmouth	Propagation of Cacti & Succulents (Tony Roberts)

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