

British Cactus & Succulent Society

Southampton & District Branch Newsletter

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Branch Secretary

David Neville
6 Parkville Road
Swaythling
Southampton
Hampshire
SO16 2JA

davnev@bopenworld.com
(023) 80551173 or
07974 191354

Newsletter Editor

Vinay Shah
29 Heathlands Road
Eastleigh
Hampshire
SO53 1GU

vvshah@clara.co.uk
(023) 80261989

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Editorial

The last month has seen good amounts of sun and rain, and it's good to see indoor and outdoor plants doing well. However, the rain in recent days does mean that slugs are starting to appear!

Announcements

On Saturday May 16th, the branch put on a display and sales table at the *Sparsholt College Countryside Day*. According to Ivor, things went well with a decent number of visitors to the stand, although it was quite blustery on the day.

Portsmouth Branch will be holding their summer Branch Show this coming weekend. Entry forms can be downloaded from their website.

On Sunday, we are again invited to visit the **Mammillaria Society's meeting at Wisley**. The meeting will open at 10am and there will be a couple of talks starting at 2pm by Ian Woolnough and Chris Davies. The meeting will close at 4pm. Later in the month is the **Bristol Cactus Mart**. There are forms on the front table to register your interest in going to either of these events (we will try and operate a car share scheme).

Last Month's Meeting

At the start of the meeting, Dot mentioned that the seedling exchange area had been set up, and those who had brought along plants for swapping had done their exchanges, so the plants that were left were up for sale or available to take away, and trading would resume in the mid-meeting interval.

Cultivation & Propagation Workshop

David mentioned that the topics discussed at the workshop varied each year – this year, the suggestions for topics were mainly from the committee. So if you want particular items covered, and they are not discussed today, do let us know for the future. We do have a second practical meeting later in the year. Success relies on audience participation and learning from one another.

First was “Cactus Kitsch”. Given our interest in the hobby, at times we buy or get given cactus-related gifts. The first item David picked up was a lamp in the shape of a green barrel cactus with fiber optic spines. Ivor had a cactus dancing toy which had given up the ghost – when it worked, it was sound activated. Next was a wooden puzzle game - Ivor had made half a dozen of these in the past and handed them out as raffle prizes. Then a sculpture which David had bought in Tenerife – it was a cactus made from interlocking light-weight wooden pieces and he kept this on a cupboard upstairs. Next was a Christmas present he had been given – it was a night light holder – he put some candles in but smoke poured out and he stopped using it! Next was an item from Bolivia - featuring a picture of a llama and an opuntia – it was Peter Down's. There was a salt & pepper cruet set and a packet of cactus erasers, from Bruce Beckerleg. There was a set of table mats and – these were Peter's and were from Ian Thwaite who still sell them. There were several sets of wax candles in the shape of cacti. Then something he had bought from T K Maxx for £3 – a glass made from recycled glass. Next was a round and shallow Caithness paperweight, featuring the orange flower of the Livingstone daisy - *mesembryanthemum criniflorum*. A pot from Bolivia was Peter Down's and a letter rack was from Margaret Corina's collection. The last item to be discussed was a ceramic plate which had been given to Ivor as a birthday present.

Ben said last autumn, he decided to use capillary matting to line his benches and during the course of this year he will see if this helps the plants retain more moisture - or if everything rots off! He asked whether anyone else had tried the same thing. John Bridgman said he uses it and has done so for several

years – it works for him, and he hadn't encountered any problems. Peter Down said he tried it but found that the plants were rooting down through the matting. Richard said he had read that if you lay the capillary matting and then put black perforated polythene above it – this solves this problem and also reduces the chances of green slime. Dot said she had used it for seedlings and young plants. Ben said he had used some in propagators and found it good for that. Michelle Fox-Rousell said she was using it for her carnivorous plants.

Ben said he had found his plants were drying too much and also he had slatted benches which was extra space he could utilise. He got some material cheap from commercial growing concern Munro Sales. So far, with the matting, he finds he is watering less. Dot said the green matting can be washed. Ben also put down heavy duty polythene under the matting. For sensitive plants, which don't like overhead watering, he just waters the matting. The surplus water drains off in the area between benches. He has about 20-30m of the matting left, so if anyone wants the material, he can do you a good price!

He has his plants arranged by genus and was finding that haworthias and gasterias which are being grown on the matting but under the main bench were remaining too wet. So he may remove the matting for these plants. Adrian Bailey said he tried the matting once with seedlings, hoping it would draw moisture into the pot - might not get up the pot if watered from the bottom. There are some pots which have a wick which contacts the bottom and Dot said she had made her own wicks.

Has it made any difference to the plants? With younger plants it seems they absorb water better than larger plants. David Neville's experience was that it has no real effect in cactus collections, which are kept dry most of the time - but with other plants which are kept moist all the time, it does help. There was a thought that water dripping down from the matting might not be so good – and with slats you have good air circulation - so covering those up might cause problems. Ben did say use the use of the matting had made a big difference in his bulb house and bulbs that have not previously flowered before have started to do so.

Mark Larter mentioned that he had a cold frame where the glass sheet was broken on top, so water gets in now. He kept Agaves in there last summer – and they were not growing very fast because they were drying out too much. He put some plastic sheeting under the plants and this has helped them to grow a lot more, due to better water retention. Alice

said she has aluminium staging and has everything in trays. She uses a jug for watering and has worked out how much each tray needs, which depends on what is in the tray and the time of year. David said most people prefer to water plants individually, but he has everything in trays and waters from the top, so that the excess water soaks up later. He asked the audience how many people water from the top, and the majority put their hands up. Alice said she uses cat litter in the compost and if she waters from the top she'll lose most of the compost. If a particular plant is not doing well, it will get watered in isolation.

David said that in a nursery he has been to in Holland, the benches are covered in a layer of peat or sand and the plants are watered from above, with a hose/rose. The excess moisture from the soil tends to encourage roots to grow out from beneath the pots - the plants grow a lot better with the moisture retention material under the pots. Mark Jakins said that plants left out in the garden over winter seem to do well – it's other things which cause problems, not the water. David said that many plants are OK, as long as they are kept frost free. A member from the audience said a large Euphorbia plant they had got from Brian Plunkett and 2 agaves were lost due to a greenhouse leak. Dot said that she has had Echeverias go to mush due to a greenhouse drip.

Richard White mentioned that he had brought along an automatic solar powered watering system which he intended to use when he was away on trips. This was the Irrigatia "Solar Powered Automatic Watering System". It was supposed to deliver more water when it is sunnier. He felt it would be useful for epiphytes and tender bulbs which don't like drying up. The kit comes with tubes, T pieces and drippers where you want the water to go and cost around £80 for the unit and an extension pack. David said we would welcome a further report on how this system worked.

Richard had also purchased heated trays from Two Wests and Elliots – and was going to use these for propagation. The trays had a built-in heating element, trapped between 2 aluminium plates. Along with the tray he had also got some aluminium angle + clear plastic panels to sit around the heated tray. He would use these items with a thermostat and sensor which had a built in timer and also a mains outlet controlled by the thermostat. He had used this system with seedlings and it seemed to be working as expected.

Going back to some questions on watering things in trays – this system might only work if all the pots were the same size and had the same compost.

However in practice, small pots would take up water to their rims and leave the rest for the larger pots. Small pots do dry out more quickly, so would need watering more often. Tom said it does depend on the compost - some composts are very open and will drain easily - but others are more dense and watering at the same rate will cause the plants to rot. Ivor mentioned there had been a leak in his greenhouse - and one of his clay trays of Lithops got soaked and must have been under water for 2-3 days. Some of the lithops plants split but didn't die. In contrast, some of his other trays had been grown hard through the winter and the small seedlings had dried up. So in this case the seedlings grew better with extra water. David mentioned that in the wild - plants can be subjected to torrential rain and can be waterlogged and still survive. David said he used a probe for large deep pots, which he doesn't water as often as smaller pots. Geoffrey Penrose said you can judge how well-watered a plant is by lifting it - but this needs knowledge of the weight when dry and also take account of plant's growth - this would be time consuming if you have a lot of plants!

Now it was time to discuss the plants which the branch had given out to members in previous years. This was just to compare how they have grown in the 3-4 of years. *Echeveria lilacina* was handed out in May 2011. The number of plants here was less than in previous years - have the rest died? Previously, the outstanding plants were Sue Wilson's and Mark Larter's - and this year the best two were Sue's and Bruce's. In the wild this plant is solitary, but Sue's was starting to produce an offset. Given the characteristics of the plant, you might think it's a hybrid or special cultivar but it's actually just a regular species. Bruce's plant was one of the best looking ones - it was nicely coloured and well shaped. David said he had not seen this species get too stemmy, but the plants should be given good light - Echeverias really benefit from that. On close inspection, Bruce's plant was also offsetting, but David said he had never seen a big multi-headed clump of this. Another plant was quite small - this happens if you don't keep repotting it and let it develop to its full potential - Echeverias do grow faster than cacti. In response to a question from the audience, the plants handed out were just standard plants obtained in a bulk tray from a Dutch nursery.

Mammillaria albilanata was given out in the same year (2011) but only a small number of these had been brought in. They varied tremendously in appearance. *M. albilanata* is usually solitary even when old, but it may offset later in life. Ivor's plant had suffered a damaged head and then recovered to form several heads, each of which was much bigger than the original plant. So his plant had put on the

most volume. Other plants looked different just due to natural variation, but one was really woolly, with lots of axillary wool. *Mammillaria microhelix* was given out in June 2013. It is related to *M. elongata* but it grows much more slowly. It will offset eventually, forming a nice clump, but these plants were still too young for that. Last year we gave out *Mammillaria glassii* f. *ascensionis*. David picked up a plant which he said was green and open, and it needed to be grown in more sun. Ivor's plant had turned into a corpse. Some of the plants were beginning to offset and David said they should go on to form beautiful plants. Geoff Penrose's plant had a stray *M. zeilmanniana* growing alongside, and he had not been able to separate the two plants. Finally, the *Frithia pulchra* which had been given out last month had already been repotted by some members. David said this would go on to form clumps up to 4 inches across.

After the break, Alice talked about Neem oil. She mentioned she was looking for some way of controlling mealy bug. She had used Provado Ultimate Bug Killer in the past - this works for a while but it needs repeated spraying and also didn't seem to work on some plants while also being quite costly to use. So she was looking for a cheaper option and something perhaps less harmful to the environment - how safe are these chemicals for yourself or your pets? She bought a bottle of Neem oil (120ml for £3.35) - and spraying her plants every 2 weeks, she expected it to last 2-3 months. She had bought it where she gets her local dog food, and was willing to buy supplies for anyone else who wanted to try it. For pets, it is used to control fleas and ticks.

The oil comes from the Neem tree, which grows in south Asia and India. The oil can be extracted from any part of the plant, but the concentration in the seeds is the highest. It has been used for thousands of years and has properties as an insecticide and fungicide. Any insect such as mealy, aphids, scale that bite plants which have been watered with Neem should be controlled. It confuses their system and hormonal balance, messes up their feeding and mating and they eventually die out. She's used it for about three months and got rid of 95% of the mealy bug in her collection. Ted Smith asked whether it was safe for humans? Alice said the only effect on humans seems to be as a contraceptive, but only when used in a high concentration. It is used in cosmetics and toothpaste, and has been used by humans for many years. Some studies have found it does not cause cancer and may even cause some cancers to shrink. It may however be toxic to fish.

Paul Klaassen said some shirts impregnated with it were recommended for some places with malaria.

Ben said that in India they have Neem trees at the centre of many villages and it has many medicinal uses. Alice said the American Environmental agency considers it safe, and it can be used on edible crops up to a day before they are consumed.

Neem has a very short half life. In soil it takes 3-22 days for it to be broken down by UV light and micro-organisms. On leaves, it stays for 1 to 2.5 days, and in water it is effective for 45 minutes to 4 days. So in order for it to work, you need to make up your spray solution just before you use it. Neem oil freezes at 18°C so she takes some oil and mixes it with detergent and then warm tap water to create a solution. For 800ml of spray solution, she mixed up 10ml of Neem and washing up liquid, in a 2:1 ratio. She recommended concentrations of ½ to 2% Neem. The spray can also be used as a drench – since any Neem taken up by the plant acts as a systemic insecticide. David mentioned that some succulents like Echeverias have farina and that might be effected by the Neem/soap mix. Alice mentioned that Othonnas don't like it – the leaves died. Ivor said he had used it on an Adenium and it seemed to burn some of the growing tips. The thing to remember is that it is not an overnight cure.

Moving on, Ivor mentioned that the pound shop, he had bought herb seeds and these were being sold with a very fine vermiculite as compost. He thought it would be perfect for seed sowing, but unfortunately has not tracked down any vermiculite of this grade in the garden centres. He filled his pots to ¾ full with his regular potting compost and then filled the top ¼ with a 50-50 mix of John Innes and the fine vermiculite, and he got very good germination, 100% on most seeds. One of the pots showed some green algae along with the seedlings and Geoffrey Penrose suggested microwaving the soil prior to using it. In the garden centre Ivor also saw *RHS RootGrow* which is a mycorrhizal fungi formulation for mixing into the soil of plants with poor roots – it's supposed to improve the root growth. As it happens he found one of his *Astrophytums* was all wobbly and had no roots, so he was going to try it out. Dot said she uses it when planting out plants and said it works well. Mike Shaw mentioned that material does not work well if you have too much phosphate in the soil. David also said that the packet lists it does not work with brassicas, rhododendrons, azaleas, heathers, cranberries, blueberries - so it may not work on some types of plants.

Ivor had some more growing tips. With Lithops, when you are pricking out the seedlings, try and grow 3-4 together in a small pot - this helps the plants to grow better and it also uses up less space.

He mentioned that at the side of his greenhouse he has 4 water butts which collect water from the garage roof, and he never runs out of this rain water in the winter. He does boil the water for the soil drench when first sowing seedlings. Alice said the instructions for sterilizing soil vary, some "recipes" mentioned cooking for a couple of hours at 150°C. Geoffrey Penrose said he used 10 minutes in a microwave per pound of soil, but make sure the temperature reaches 180°C but does not go over. Alice mentioned that Westland's Gro-Sure Vermiculite and had fine particles and cost £8 for 10 litres - Ivor asked her to get some. Alice said she had planted various things this year. A pot of *Sinningia* had produced thousands of seedlings in a 2 inch pot – she had no idea how she would pot this on. She mentioned she got some of the seeds from a Czech succulent society. *Ceropegia woodii variegata* had been from her own seed and was doing well – David mentioned the seeds are not viable for long period. Ivor gave a final tip for repotting seedlings – if the roots are hard to free from the soil, soak the whole lot in water – eventually the soil will break away and this allows the seedlings to be separated more easily.

David held up some pots and said he had been sent them by Tony Irons from Bristol. His website has a link to Marie's Pots (Marie is his daughter). Alice said the pots looked like ones she had got in the Czech Republic, and she had been using the smaller sizes of pots for a few years now, with no signs of deterioration.

David now started a discussion on plants grown outdoors. Ivor said he had been growing *Agave americana* and *Agave victoriae-reginae* out in his garden for 2 years with no protection, and both had survived, despite being occasionally covered in snow. He had been growing *Crassula sarcocaulis* outside for 10 years and this had made a nice bonsai plant. Richard White mentioned he had grown an agave outdoors and it had done less well - the frost had caused some parts of the leave to rot off.

David mentioned he had seen *Echeveria agavoides* being grown in gardens in Cornwall, but here in Hampshire it would die outside. The last 2 winters were not a good test for hardiness. Really people need to grow something for 10 years to be able to say that it is hardy. Wet heavy soil in a exposed position will cause problems. He has 2 agaves in his front garden, and a few years ago, *A. americana variegata* was 5 feet across with 50 offsets and it died – and the normal blue one got affected but has since recovered. Keith & Kathy Flanagan said they grow *Agave parryi* outside and wrap the plants in polythene bubble wrap for the winter, to keep them

dry. David said in people in Cornwall can grow things that we can't grow in an unheated greenhouse. He asked if anyone had suggestions for things that might grow outside. *Aloe striatula* was mentioned, one of the members had been growing it for 14-15 years outdoors. Richard mentioned *Aloe aristata* does well outside. Paul Klaassen mentioned that in Patagonia, he had encountered *Austrocactus bertinii* growing in the Andes at an altitude of 2500m - and 3 weeks later saw the same species growing on the beach at 40°C, so we have to be careful about which clone you might have. David said that *Echinocereus* from southern USA are covered in the snow in winter - but in our wet winters they wouldn't do well.

Finally, David covered some plants which had been brought in for identification. With *Rebutias* he couldn't really tell what they were, flowers were needed to assist in determining the species. An *Echeveria* is often seen in garden centres under the name *E. peacockii*. Another plant might be *E. secunda*, but he had not seen it with long stems before. An old plant of *Gymnocalycium spagazzinii* - it was a tired looking plant with brown marks. Two plants looked very pale and this looked like red spider damage. A *Lobivia* was not growing as well as the *Oxalis* in the same pot! David suggested repotting it. Mark Larter wondered whether it was some sort of virus.

The meeting ended with Michelle showing us a plant she had brought in - this was the insectivorous Cobra plant *Darlingtonia californica* - which was coming into flower. The insect trap looks like a cobra's head at the top of a funnel.

Vinay Shah

Table Show Results

There were 7 entries in the May table show, and 3 entries for "Plants in Flower".

	Cacti – 3 Cacti	Succulents – 3 Succulents
Open	(1) I Biddlecombe	(1) B Beckerleg
	(2) B Beckerleg	(2) I Biddlecombe
	(3) -	(3) -
Intermediate	(1) I Biddlecombe	(1) I Biddlecombe
	(2) B Beckerleg	(2) -
	(3) -	(3) -

Cacti/Succulent in Flower
(1) T Radford <i>Dorstenia ellenbeckiana</i>
(2) T Radford <i>Pelargonium flagratum</i> (?)
(3) B Beckerleg <i>Mammillaria zeilmanniana</i>

Ivor Biddlecombe

Bookworm Corner

After a spell of warm and sunny weather it has changed again back to been cooler and windy. However the garden plants seem happy enough, all growing and producing an abundance of flowers. The hostas are now coming into full leaf which means that I am forever moving the pots further away from each other on a weekly basis as they keep expanding and trying to shade each other out.

The vegetable patch is romping away with the garlic and onions growing well and the potatoes are starting to flower. The rhubarb is currently going for world domination (must make some jam with it) and at the other extreme the tomato plants are complete rubbish at the moment as they are refusing to grow.

The garden is full of noisy starling fledglings which compete with the house sparrow fledgling for the use of either of the two bird baths. The other morning I counted five young starlings all in the bird bath together with a lot of squawking required. With the exception of couple of blackbird fledgling we haven't yet had any other species, however I do think this breeding season started later than usual.

The cacti house is still full of colour, with *Mammillaria*, *Astrophytum*, *Thelocactus*, *Copiapoa*, *Rebutia* and *Parodia* in flower and the *Neoporteria*'s are just beginning to flower. The *Gasterias* and *Echeverias* are still flowering well. The potting up of the collection continues and Mark has bravely been potting up his scrappy assortment of *Opuntias* with me standing in the wings with baited breath in case he impales himself on one of the devils! Mark's last encounter with *Opuntia microdasys* went badly when it fell on his head whilst trying to water the potatoes behind the bench it was sitting on. I spent a considerable amount of time with a damp tissue and a pair of tweezers picking out the spines out of his head and ear lobe.....unfortunately I forgot to take any pictures for the members talk next January!!

Do come and have a look at the **Books For Sale** down in the library corner.

'ENJOYED THE LECTURE? THEN ENJOY THE BOOK!'

May

May was the annual cultivation and propagation workshop. Our new book '**Succulent Propagation**' (Kapitany & Schulz) is well worth a look. Also look at '**The Complete Book of Cacti & Succulents**' (Hewitt T.). This book has a chapter on 'care and cultivation' which illustrates growing mediums, potting, nutrients, watering, light levels and temperatures etc. In addition propagation by cuttings, seed, grafting and division are covered including plenty of photos. Another book, '**Growing Cacti and Other Succulents in the Conservatory and Indoors**' (Bell S.) includes topics on composts, watering, pests and diseases in addition to propagation by offsets, cuttings, seed and grafting. The books by John Pilbeam '**How to care for your cacti**' and '**How to care for your succulents**' although now quite dated, are still a valuable read.

June

This month we have Chris Eyers giving a presentation on 'Namibia – plants and animals'. Unfortunately I cannot produce any books on the wildlife front but I can recommend a few that should hopefully pick up on the flora Chris encountered in Namibia. *Lithops* is one genus frequently found in the region so if these plants are of interest you may want to study them further. I can recommend two books, '**Lithops, Flowering Stones**' (Cole. D.T.) which is rather dated, but has an interesting chapter on morphology, including a section of seed capsules. Other chapters include habitat with some excellent habitat location pictures; cultivation and

species descriptions with colour photographs and helpful distribution maps. The other book is '**Lithops – Treasures of the Veld**' (Hammer S.A), this has species descriptions and excellent pictures on species and cultivars. A key for identifying species is located in appendix 8. A different genus frequent to Africa is of course the aloe and we have an excellent book '**Aloes – The Definitive Guide**' (Carter S. *et al*) which doubles up as a door stop on windy days. This book covers everything from the history of aloes in books and historic collectors through to a brief account on distribution and uses. The main use of the book is for identification with the key separated out on the growth habit of the plants. Each species then has a brief description and a few photographs. If you like aloes you will spend a few happy evenings flicking through this book. All of these books are to be found in '**Featured Book Corner**', do come and borrow them!

Sue Wilson

Next Month's Meeting

The next meeting will be held on 7th July and will feature a talk by Reading branch members Keith and Kathy Flanagan on "Our Collection". They come along to some of our meetings and members from our Branch who have visited their collection on Open Days will be able to confirm that they grow a very impressive selection of plants.

The July Table Show will consist of the **Echinopsis Group (cacti)** and **Gasteria Group (succulents)** classes. 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. In addition there is a class for any flowering cactus or succulent plant.

The *Echinopsis* group includes *Acanthocalycium*, *Chamaecereus*, *Denmoza*, *Echinopsis*, *Helianthocereus*, *Hymenorebutia*, *Leucosteles*, *Lobivia*, *Pseudolobivia*, *Pygmaecereus*, *Soehrensia* and *Trichocereus*.

The *Gasteria* Group contains only *Gasteria*.

From 2015, the table show classes will now use the classifications from the *Guide to Shows 10th Edition*. (contact me if you need a copy of this)

For committee members, a reminder that there is a committee meeting due to be held on 17th June.

Forthcoming Events

Sat	6 th	Jun	Portsmouth	Summer Show at St. Colman's Church Hall, Cosham, PO6 2JJ
Sun	7 th	Jun	Southampton	Branch visit to RHS Wisley & Mammillaria Society Event
Sat	13 th	Jun	Isle of Wight	Big Bend (David Minnion)
Wed	17 th	Jun	Southampton	Branch Committee Meeting
Sat	20 th	Jun	Portsmouth	Baja California (David Minnion)
Sat	27 th	Jun	Southampton	Branch visit to Bristol Cactus Mart, Portishead, Bristol
Tue	7 th	Jul	Southampton	Our Collection (Keith & Kathy Flanagan)
Sat	11 th	Jul	Isle of Wight	What I Did Last Winter (Paul Klaassen)
Sat	18 th	Jul	Portsmouth	Echinocereus (John Pilbeam)
Sun	26 th	Jul	Southampton	Southampton Branch Garden Party - hosted by Alice Jankovec
Tue	28 th	Jul-	Southampton	Display / Plant Sales @ New Forest Show, Brockenhurst
Thu	30 th			
Sat	1 st	Aug	Southampton	visit Oxford Branch Show: Old Mill Hall, Grove, Wantage OX12 7LB
Tue	4 th	Aug	Southampton	Ask The Experts – Cultivation Masterclass
Sat	8 th	Aug	Isle of Wight	Open Evening at Robin & Joan Goodredge (members only)
Sat	15 th	Aug	Portsmouth	No meeting

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