

# British Cactus & Succulent Society

## Southampton & District Branch Newsletter

September 2011



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### Editorial

August has raced by and today's gusty weather was reminiscent of the sort of weather we usually get much later in the year. We've had a fair amount of rain during the summer and for once the garden plants must be feeling quite happy, although perhaps flowering plants could have done with some more sunshine.

I grow a few varieties of *Schizostylis* in various parts of my garden – these normally flower from late September onwards, but a few of them started flowering a couple of weeks ago. These South African plants are well worth trying because of their late season colour and they also seem to be able to compete with the weeds!

### Announcements

Next Saturday (10<sup>th</sup> September), the branch will be putting on display and sales table at the **Romsey Show**. David, Geoff, and Dot will miss the event so we'll rely on help from other members on the day. If anyone is keen to help at the stand, we may have one entry pass still available.

Last month, Paul Klaassen brought in copies of a "limited edition" self-published 40-page book which described a visit to Gordon Rowley. If you are interested in this, please have a word with Paul.

**Gloucester Branch** are celebrating their 45<sup>th</sup> **Anniversary** with a plant sale, auction and open day at Geoff Bowman's in Newent on Sunday 2<sup>nd</sup> October. Geoff has a large general collection as well as a national collection of Agaves. Further details from: <http://www.limax.co.uk/glosbcss/sale.htm>

**The Cactus Explorer** is a free on-line Journal for Cactus and Succulent enthusiasts, produced by Graham Charles. A pdf file of the Journal can be viewed or downloaded from the website

<http://www.cactusexplorers.org.uk/>

Please be patient waiting for it to download since it is nearly 10MB in size. You will need a recent copy of Acrobat Reader to view the journal and to utilise the links in the document. You may already have this on your PC, if not you can obtain a free copy from: <http://get.adobe.com/reader/>

**Portsmouth Branch** will be holding their **Autumn Show** on the 1<sup>st</sup> of October. Schedules are available from the front table (or the Portsmouth branch's website).

Next month, our Branch will be hosting the **Zone 11 Quiz**. Teams from Portsmouth and the Isle of Wight will be attending, and we'll also expect the audience to form a fourth team. On previous occasions, this has been a fun evening and we expect the same this year, as we attempt to retain the Mealy Bug trophy. Because of the Quiz, there will be **no table show next month**.

### Last Month's Meeting

Ben Turner had brought along some seed heads of a succulent *Pelargonium* – *P. ferulaceum*. David Neville mentioned these could be sowed right away and you could expect germination within 24-36 hours. The plant produces attractive white/magenta flowers.

### Cultivation Masterclass

Our chairman Geoff Card introduced our speaker, John Pilbeam. Since his last visit to our branch, John had been elected to the post of **BCSS President**. John was taken aback at the huge number of plants brought in by the members - he had thought it was going to be half an evening's talk! He wasn't sure what to say about the various plants assembled in front of him so would just pick plants at random and talk about them – the audience were invited to ask questions as we went along.

The first plant was an *Epithelantha* which belonged to Ivor. Ivor thought it had been on a graft, but the graft had perished and the plant had managed to root itself. John joked that he heard this excuse all the time when judging. A second plant of the same genus was definitely grafted. Although the grower doesn't really care whether the plant is on its own roots or on a graft, it does make a difference in judging - plants on grafts may be marked down compared to plants on their own roots. Another plant of Ivor's was labelled *Epithelantha bokei*, but John said it was mislabelled - *E. bokei* is smooth to the touch, and this might just be a variety of *E. micromeris*. These plants grow round Monterrey, Nuevo Leon in Mexico. Ivor felt the best growth is achieved in clay pots placed on the top shelf - the plants like to be grown hard. Next was a plant of Ted Smith's from the same genus. John thought it might be *E. polycephala* because of the narrower and smaller heads.

Another plant from Ivor was seeking a name. The green body and shape indicated it was an *Ophthalmophyllum*. "Let me know when you find out" was John's response - even Steve Hammer would struggle to name some of these mesembs! Next was a 10 year old *Ariocarpus*, again from Ivor which he believed to be a cross or a hybrid. However, John thought it was a straight *Ariocarpus retusus*. The Japanese produce good books illustrating the many hybrids which have been produced. The next plant was also Ivor's and it was *Echinocereus rigidissimus* v. *rubispinus*. Good light helps the plant maintain the red colouring of the spines. John said the plant reminded him of an occasion when Stirling Baker got cross with him because he gave a better plant of this species a prize over Stirling's supposedly rare and slow growing *Echinocereus lindsayi*.

Next was a large specimen of a plant labelled *Gymnocalycium reductum*. "You need someone who's written a book on this genus" John said. (His book on this genus was published in 1995!) Off-hand he didn't know whether the name was correct. Offsets had burst through the side of the main body and Ivor mentioned it had pure white flowers. John said that once plants get this big, the energy has to go somewhere and so offsets can be produced in cultivation, even if it remains solitary in the wild. *Gymnocalyciums* flower from the top, so if you see flowers emerging from near the base, it is often an offset which is flowering.

John mentioned that cacti are incredibly versatile. Once he had chopped up a leaf of an *Epiphyllum* for propagation, and the flower buds on the segments changed from flower buds to growth buds. The

same thing can happen with *Opuntia* cuttings as he found with *Opuntia sulphurea*. Another of Ivor's plants was *Opuntia pachypus* - these plants were grown from flower buds. John said the flowers are really modified stems and so they can transform into plants if necessary. Ivor mentioned that this plant was supposed to have orange-red flowers, but his produced cream flowers. John stated that flower colours do sometimes vary with the time of the year. Aloes which produce pink flowers in the summer produce yellow flowers in the winter. Ivor wanted John to discuss just one more of his plants - it was a superb multi-headed *Astrophytum* hybrid which he had won the previous weekend, at the Gordon Rowley 90<sup>th</sup> birthday convention. Whoever had grown it had done a very good job, and it was amazing that someone would donate such a quality plant to a raffle.

Paul Klaassen asked "Do many people grow *Austrocactus*?" Most people seem to say they've never seen one in real life. John said you rarely see them these days. With ever-increasing winter heating bills, Paul felt the genus has its attractions, since they are supposed to be one of the most cold-hardy of cacti. The plants come from a wide habitat, and some from lower regions may not experience the same conditions as those which grow higher in the Andes. They are relatively easy to grow from seed.

Chris Anderson had brought along four *Echeverias* for comment. One of them had grown quite leggy, with leaves atop a tall stem. Where would you cut it for a cutting? John said it would have to be somewhere near the top - it would be no good taking it low down where the trunk is hard and woody, so an inch or so below the young growth would be about right. He also advised watering the plant well, otherwise the stump might die back. Lay the cutting on a dry tray - you need to let it dry off thoroughly, and you should see roots within a couple of weeks. This was a good time of the year to do this. One word of warning he did have is that not all *Echeverias* are this easy to propagate. *Echeveria cante* is particularly difficult since it will just dry down. The best option is to cut through with a few leaves left on the trunk - then it may produce some offsets. Other tricks you can use with *Echeverias* is to root the leaves that appear on the flower stems. Pick these leaves before the flowers start opening. Chris's next plant was a little pink *Echeveria* which regularly produced a completely black leaf - she took these off as they formed, and the next week it would do it again, and as a result, the plant was slowly diminishing. John thought it might be a fungal problem. Chris wanted names for the remaining two plants. One of these seemed to be *E.*

*colorata* or *E. lindsayana*. A lot of these have been hybridised and the best thing to do is to check the flowers against the book. The second plant had basal flower stems and it might be a hybrid, possibly with some *E. canaliculata* in it.

One member from the audience mentioned they were thinking of devoting a greenhouse to Echeverias, an idea that met with John's approval. His question was "If you have a mixture of hybrids and species, what would be a reasonable temperature to maintain?" John said this was a difficult question. He went to Mexico last year in November – and on his return in December, there was snow everywhere. Eventually he got to his nursery and found that the heating had failed in one of the greenhouses. Most of the Aloes in there turned into mush. However, no more than 2 or 3 of the Echeverias died – and these were small plants being propagated, so pretty much all the Echeverias survived the frost. So most of these plants can take temperatures down to freezing or even slightly below, provided they are kept dry – many are high mountain plants. So if your heating keeps the frost at bay, you should be OK. There are a handful which come from warmer areas. "What about the hybrids?" Provided they are Echeveria hybrids and not a cross with a more tender genus, they should be just as hardy as the species.

Next was a plant from Tony Grech – an *Astrophytum* which never flowered and which also wasn't growing much. It was an *A. myriostigma* with no flecking. John commented that it looked like it had had a hard life. He suggested repotting it and checking the roots. Also perhaps try feeding it. As for compost he suggested just using the normal compost that Tony used. The topic of which compost to use is such a vexed problem. Peat is good for young plants. He also advised adding a lot of grit to the compost - the more difficult the plant is, put more grit in – and you can go all the way up to 50-60% grit or pumice. You can also use Cornish grit, coarse sand or fine grit. The main thing is to achieve no standing water around the roots – good drainage is most important. You can also use clay pots to aid drainage. Coir doesn't work too well except for very young plants. Most Mexican plants are lime lovers - so use limestone chips in the compost for those. For South American plants, in general he would use more peat, since they prefer more acid conditions, although Paul mentioned that some parts of Brazil do have limestone.

Plants that grow side by side in our greenhouse may have very different conditions in the wild. The main point is to be flexible and to try out any experiments on a few plants which you don't mind losing.

Another option suggested from the audience was to use soil in the bottom of the pot but to then fill to the rim with a large amount of grit – so as to keep the neck free of any soil. John said *Echeveria laui* is an example of a plant that needs to be dry round the base of the stem. If you have a mixed collection and don't have the time to water plants individually, then he advised varying the grit content so that everything could still be watered in one go. He mentioned there was a chap in the West Country (whose name he had forgotten) who grew great plants in pure grit. Some Stapeliad growers also grow their plants in pure pumice. To use solely these mediums would require regular watering and feeding. That prompted a question about what he used for feed. The answer was Chempak No. 3 in the Spring, switching to Chempak No. 8 in June/July. He also suggested watering the plants with the feed at full strength – there was no need to use diluted feed, the plants would take all the feed they can get. The alternative to regular feeding is to repot your plants every two years - but this quickly becomes daunting once you have several hundred plants. Alice asked where he got the pumice from. John said he obtained it from the continent and was not aware of any sources in this country. Paul said he had been told that German loft insulation granules were a possible candidate, and he was going to get some later this year. David said there was also one make of Tesco's cat litter which does not break down when watered.

Tom Radford had brought in a couple of bulbous plants – a *Boophone distachia* and a *Scadoxus puniceus*. The former does not have much of a root system and could remain in a small pot. Ben mentioned that like *Haemanthus*, some bulbs flower better if their roots have restricted pot space. He also said that *Scadoxus* were almost semi-epiphytic - and it would take a few years to reach flowering size.

Ben himself had brought along a group of plants for identification. "*Agave mandianum*" was a plant he had got from Wisley but he did not believe it to be a valid epithet. John said that David Bowdery from Kings Lynn knew this genus well, and perhaps one day soon he himself will write a book on this genus. The other plants were obtained from Holly Gate and one of them possibly had some *Agave univittata* in it. John asked Ben to send him some pictures and get in touch and he'd try and find out more information for him. With the *Opuntia*, the name cylindri-something came to mind. John said he will do a book on *Opuntias* too and also took the chance to plug his soon-to-be-released book on *Echinocereus*. Paul suggested the plant was *Austrocylindropuntia subulata*, or something related.

John wasn't sure about a *Gasteria* which was forming strange clusters. It might possibly be a hybrid. Because of the way the offsets join to the parent plant, if you're going to try and split up a *Gasteria*, take it out of the pot and tackle it from underneath. A tall *Crassula* plant which Ben has repotted had white flecks on it. These looked like lime marks or some sort of deposit and he wondered whether the plant itself was responsible. Paul mentioned that there was a "money plant" at Holly Gate which used to do something similar - the plant secreted a white substance from its stomata. The flower of the plant resembled *Crassula ovata* although the plant was a bit different from the normal form of *ovata*. It also had been obtained from Wisley. A few of Ben's *Haworthias* needed naming. The first was identified as *H. glabrata*. The second was getting yellow leaves after being repotted and it was actually an *Abromeitiella*, which is a bromeliad. The remaining plants were *H. batesiana*, *H. attenuata clariperla*, *H. attenuata britteniana* and *H. venosa*.

After the tea-time break, John looked at a *Sulcorebutia rauschii* which was rotting in the centre. This would need to be cut out, and then require some hope that the infection didn't spread. Another plant was identified as *S. markusii* and there was also *S. canigueralii*, which has dark red flowers.

Adrian needed some advice on a sick plant – an *Adenium obesum* which had some yellow leaves on it. He had had the plant for a year and it had started going yellow after 6 months. He had also repotted it in May and at the time, it had a fair amount of root. John said it felt tight in the pot and he suggested repotting it again. Adrian said that he had put the plant where it received a lot of sun and John suggested reducing this until the plant was healthier. The plant next to it was *Euphorbia horrida*. Adrian said this columnar plant would just not grow vertically. It wanted to lean over to the side, despite him trying all sorts of things to prop it up. John suggested putting it into a deeper pot. Another possibility was that perhaps the roots were doing something strange and pushing a side of the plant up in a certain direction.

*Echeveria moranii* is a tough plant to grow. It is deciduous and has tuberous roots. In the winter the leaves want to die back, so if you give it water, it doesn't like it and dies - and if you don't give it water, it can dry out and also die. Tom Radford's *Leuchtenbergia principis* had a flower bud in the centre and it had just started to flower in the last couple of years. It needs a good sized pot and has a large root. If you leave it too dry, the tubercles die

back. However, this was a good looking plant which Tom said was about 15 years old. John suggested potting it on, but to be careful not to disturb the hair roots. With a plant of this shape, it is tempting to pull out the plant from the top but doing this can damage the roots. So check that the holes in the bottom don't have roots wrapped round them and also tap the sides of the pot to loosen it and then there will be less chance of damage to the roots. With clay pots you can put shards in and this also makes it easier to remove the plant. *Leuchtenbergia* is actually very closely related to *Ferocactus* but it can't be acknowledged as such - since it was named first, all the *Ferocactus* would need to be renamed if *Leuchtenbergia* was included with them.

There was an example of *Notocactus buiningii* on the table - some clones grow well, other clones just don't. John agreed it was one of the toughest to grow - more warmth helps, and also water it well. Winters like last year can also affect plants. He had a customer who had bought £300-worth of plants from him and then didn't heat his greenhouse at all. He ended up having to buy another £300 of plants this year - he loved customers like that! However, he did feel sorry for him so gave him a discount this year. On hearing this, Paul Klaassen mentioned he too had lost most of his plants last year but John said he couldn't remember when Paul had actually visited his nursery!

*Ferocactus macrodiscus* was a nice plant and John said the entire genus was much underrated, and he recommended it as a beautiful group of plants to grow. People think that they have to get to a huge size before they flower but that isn't the case and plants can flower from 3 inches and up. *Ferocactus viridescens*, *F. fordii*, *F. echidne* are all worth a try. The best grower of this genus in the country is Derek Bowdery, who runs Eau Brink Nursery, near Kings Lynn. His *Ferocacti* look beautiful and he has grown seed of plants from Mexico such as *F. peninsulae* and got them to flower at a reasonably small size. He has also flowered *F. gracilis*, *F. rectispinus* and *F. hamatacanthus*.

A *notocactus* plant on the table looked like it had had a hard life. The marks on it were probably not red spider but it may have been neglected and underpotted. John said you have to keep these plants growing for them to look their best. Paul thought it was a yellow spined form of *Notocactus scopia*. Paul also mentioned that he treats his *Notocactus* like *Frailea* - they like lots of moisture, and he places the pots in trays which he keeps full of water from April through to October.

Gymnocalyciums are also nice plants to grow - the plant being discussed was a good specimen of *G. cardenasianum* or the similar *G. spagazzinii*. There were some signs of ageing at the base of the plant - to minimise this you again have to keep moving the plant on, although it wasn't a big detractor during judging. Sometimes you see a large clump of heads but if the main head has died or has been removed, a judge can mark it down. In due course the missing growth may not be noticeable. Most show classes limit you to one plant per pot - but in the case of a plant like *Crassula nemorosa*, it makes dozens of tubers naturally and you can't avoid multiple plants in a pot!

An aloe which was a bit lanky was an *Aloe arborescens* type, but it seemed to not be getting sustenance from the root and was struggling to grow. There was also a lovely plant of *Aloe somaliensis* with nicely marked leaves. John said he had been growing some of these for sale and lost them in the winter incident. Despite being from a warm country like Somalia, these can take temperatures down to the 30s - sometimes the plants are high altitude plants and are used to cooler conditions. It can take a fair amount of sun and would colour up nicely. However if you have a plant which has been growing in the shade, don't move it into strong sun right away since the growth will be tender and it will scorch - so let it acclimatise gradually.

There was a nice variegated yucca on the table but John didn't have anything to say about it. *Graptopetalum paraguayense* is misnamed and actually comes from Mexico. It is winter hardy and he's grown it with *Sempervivums*. A *Copiapoa* had been brought in for naming. John said Graham Charles would be better for this - *Copiapoa* plants in cultivation look nothing like those in habitat. He thought it could be *C. cinerea*, Paul thought it might possibly be *C. dealbata*.

If you like *Mammillarias*, John suggested growing *M. guelzowiana* since it has one of the best flowers in the genus. It is difficult to grow to any size and this plant of Ivor's was doing very well. Ivor said it seems to prefer a clay pot - it is susceptible to overwatering and never develops a strong root system. John said many of the *Mammillarias* do like to travel by virtue of their hooked spines catching on to passing animals, so they don't tend to develop strong roots. In particular, plants from Baja California have very shallow root systems, so don't put them into too big or deep a pot. *Mamilopsis senilis* is another plant with showy flowers. Paul said he found it north of Durango growing in dry patches amongst moss!

Chris Anderson mentioned she was interested in *Sempervivums* - but there are few books on the genus, will anybody produce a book on them? John stated that the problem is that the interest is all in the hybrids rather than the species, and there are just too many of them to cover. There are catalogues and CDs available which do show the hybrids:

<http://www.fernwood-nursery.co.uk/semps/sc.htm>

There is also a list of the cultivars at :

<http://miklanek.tripod.com/MCS/cv.html>

At the end of the talk, our president Peter Down thanked John for his impromptu discussions and comments even without having had any prior notice of the plants.

Vinay Shah

### Table Show Results

There were 24 entries in the August table show.

	Cacti – Mammillaria	Succulents – Euphorbia
Open	(1) T Radford Mammillaria sp.	(1) T Grech Euphorbia virosa
	(2) T Grech Mammillaria picta	(2) T Radford Euphorbia cylindrifolia
	(3) J Burnay Mammillaria bocasana	(3) T Grech Euphorbia susannae
Intermediate	(1) T Grech Mammillaria albilanata	(1) T Grech Euphorbia horrida
	(2) T Radford Mammillaria carmenae	(2) T Radford Euphorbia sp.
	(3) A Jankovec Mammillaria perbella	(3) J Roskilly Euphorbia sp.

Ivor Biddlecombe

## Next Month's Meeting

Our next meeting will be held on the 4<sup>th</sup> of October, and we will be hosting the Zone 11 Quiz. We will be expecting teams and visitors from our neighbours at Portsmouth and the Isle of Wight to attend, and will be hoping our own team can defend ownership of the Mealy Bug trophy, which we won at the Isle of Wight last year.

Although the branch programme mentions table show classes for October, because we will be busy enough hosting the Quiz, at a previous committee meeting it was decided that there will be no table show at the October meeting.

For committee members, a reminder that a committee meeting is due to be held on Monday, 19<sup>th</sup> September.

## Forthcoming Events

Sat	10 <sup>th</sup>	Sep	Romsey	Soton Branch Display / Plant Sales @ Romsey Show
Sat	10 <sup>th</sup>	Sep	Isle of Wight	"Fossils" - Mrs Simpson
Sat	17 <sup>th</sup>	Sep	Portsmouth	"USA 2011" - Ian Woolnough
Mon	19 <sup>th</sup>	Sep	Southampton	Branch Committee Meeting
Sat	1 <sup>th</sup>	Oct	Portsmouth	Portsmouth Autumn Show (@ Widley)
Tue	4 <sup>th</sup>	Oct	Southampton	Zone 11 Multimedia Quiz
Sat	8 <sup>th</sup>	Oct	Isle of Wight	"Richtersveld Part 2" - Rodney Sims
Sat	15 <sup>th</sup>	Oct	Portsmouth	"Cape Bulbs" - Terry Smale
Tue	1 <sup>st</sup>	Nov	Southampton	"The Little Karoo" - Rodney Sims
Sat	12 <sup>th</sup>	Nov	Isle of Wight	To be confirmed - Suzanne & Tony Mace
Sat	19 <sup>th</sup>	Nov	Portsmouth	"Travels in Southern Mexico" - David Neville

Branch website: <http://www.southampton.bcsc.org.uk>