

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@btopenworld.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 gone by very quickly. The weather has been mixed and it seems that some plants get a "second wind" during spells such as these. I was quite surprised to see a couple of large yellow flowers on *Notocactus magnificus*, on the last day of September – I don't recollect it flowering quite this late.

Earlier in the month I had to have quite a clearout of old plants to house the 6 seed tray-fulls of plants I brought back from ELK. That doesn't sound like a lot but if I say over 100 new pots then it perhaps gives a better indication! For those who have not been to ELK, I have put some pictures of the event on our website.

Announcements

The branch put on a successful display at the **Romsey Show**, in the middle of September. From all accounts, the event went well and we again won a Gold Medal and the accompanying cash prize!

The **Annual Branch Dinner** will be held on Friday 11th October, and the venue will again be the Luzborough House, which is situated between Romsey and North Baddesley. Please let David Neville know if you would like to attend. We usually meet there from 7:00pm onwards, for a 7:30pm start.

Last Month's Meeting

Alpines & Cacti of Merida

John Hughes said his story started in 1975. He worked in a forensic laboratory for the Peruvian police for three months and so learnt Spanish. Since then he had visited Mexico and other parts of South America and also learnt Portuguese. In 1977, the forensic lab had some visitors from Venezuela, who were there to learn about Toxicology. Since he was the only one who understood Spanish, he was introduced to them. In reality they spoke quite good English anyway! They kept in touch and told him he should come over and visit them. One of the visitors had a son who was born in England and he stayed with John for a while, while studying for a MSc at Kings College.

In November 2006, John headed off to Caracas. Venezuela is 7 times the size of England. It is on the north coast of South America and quite close to the equator, so the temperature does not vary much throughout the year – it's almost always 80°F and 80% humidity. Merida is at an altitude of just under 5000 feet above sea level, and the temperatures there are more pleasant, ranging from 65°F to 68°F, rather like an eternal Spring. It has a population of 300,000, of which 60,000 are students. It is a strange and interesting place, with a Bohemian feel to it.

When he visited, Hugo Chavez was the president in charge of the country. They have had 2 long term dictators, each in power for 40 years. Hugo had led a military coup, got arrested and put in prison, then got a pardon and got in through the ballot box. He changed the flag of Venezuela so that the horse on the coat of arms ran to the left rather than to the right and also renamed it the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela. John mentioned that his friends – who were middle class – were always worried because Hugo's policies were intended to take things away from well-off people. The country receives an enormous amount of money from oil, and this was used to buy votes. In particular, petrol only costs a few pence per litre. Government employees were expected to support Chavez in elections or lose their jobs.

When they left Caracas for the trip to Merida (12-14 hours away by road) they headed for Santo Domingo and stopped at a little petrol station which had a basic restaurant. His friend offered to pay for the food, so he offered to pay for the petrol. They had pancakes with meat. The food cost £4, but for 20 litres of fuel, he got change out of 50p! Sugar costs £1.50 / kilo, water is expensive – but his friend said his electricity bill for the month was 43p!

They would look first at the alpine flora. He mentioned the plants are struggling due to global warming, and it is 16000 feet before you see permanent snow. There are two areas of xerophytic vegetation near Merida. Within the valley, at Lagunillas there is an area of 300 km² at altitudes of 2000-6000 feet. There is another rain shadow area at Mucuchies, but he did not visit that second area. In these, there are about 17 species of cacti, according to a booklet by Jose Rondon who works at the University of the Andes. It's not like reading the new Cactus Lexicon - the only book Jose had was Britton & Rose from 1910, so the naming was a little different from what we'd expect these days.

John said he normally goes to the alpine garden society for identification of the alpiners, but the last time there was an article on alpiners in Venezuela was 1937 and the black and white pictures in that book were on the poor side. For a lot of the plants you could only determine the genus. He did find a book that they copied for him at the National Library, and on the last day of his stay, by coincidence, he found 2 copies of the "Flora of the Mountains" at the house of a Venezuelan painter.

We stated with a map showing the position of Venezuela in relation to South America. It is one of the 50 largest countries in the world, and has a big coastline on the Caribbean Sea. On the left is the Andes, which split into different ranges at their northern extreme. Towards the north is a blue lagoon, which is the lake at Maracaibo, the centre of the oil exploration area.

Travelling from Caracas, they would pass through the towns of Valencia and Barquisimeto. They would come back from San Cristobal, using a new highway to the south of the Andes. Near Santo Domingo is Pico El Aguila (Eagle's Peak). They stayed at the hotel La Sierra in Santo Domingo where rooms were £30/night for 2, with breakfast included. The name of the town square was Plaza Bolivar. We saw some of the scenery at 11000 feet (Puerto Nuevo) and there's a scientific observatory near here. It was the early summer and they tend to have a slightly dry period around Christmas. Along the roadside he found *Echeveria recurvata*. This

was only discovered in the 1980s – it is very plentiful but was confused with *Echeveria bicolor* – and although named *recurvata*, only some forms have the recurved leaves. It looks different in cultivation. We saw a view of Pico El Aguila at 4029 metres along with his friend Gusman. There was a nice chapel here which attracts worshippers from the surrounding area.

Alpiners are traditionally thought of as dwarf plants growing at altitude or in cool conditions. We saw *Malvastrum acaule* with white flowers – this is from the mallow family. In Peru the same plants go under another name (Acaulimalva). It should be easy to grow in a cold greenhouse. John mentioned that very few plants from South America are in cultivation other than *Alstromerias*. *Acaena cylindristachya* has silver leaves and very spiky seed pods which attach to passing animals. *Senecio formosus* forms 4 feet high plants. They have mauve flowers and fluffy seed heads and are very attractive. A view from 4000m showed the wonderful scenery. *Espeletia moritziana* are South American flannel flowers. They are in the daisy family and hairy leaves, and hair on all parts including the flower buds. It is hard to distinguish the species. In the 1937 article, there were 2 *Hypericums* described here – *H. thuyoides* and *H. laricifolium* – both plants with thin pine like foliage. It may be an ideal plant for gardens but has never come into cultivation, he did find one but didn't know which species it was. Castilleja is the indian paint brush - named after Domingo Castilleja. It is also called Spanish flag because of the red and yellow colouring of the flowers. It is a parasite which grows on grass roots. David Neville mentioned he had seen these in Arizona, and John said that the plants in the high mountains of Venezuela - are a combination of South American plants as well as ones which came down from North America.

Sisyrinchium micranthum were tiny plants with yellow flowers, less than 1.5 inches tall. He found another *Espeletia* – this was a different species, with yellow flowers. The highest point they reached was 13500 feet. There was a fern with interesting twisted leaves. *Liabum megacephalum* is from the daisy family. *Jamesonia canescens* is particularly common in Venezuela, Peru, and Colombia. It forms stems 5-6 feet high and is a beautiful orange-pink and grey colour. The scenery here was also stunning. The plants at high altitude are normally small but we saw other large plants – somewhat equivalent to the giant lobelias found on Kilimanjaro. Plants tend to be small at high altitudes because the wind can be quite strong at high altitudes.

From the road to Aji, we saw a view of Merida and the cathedral. It is a beautiful town. Downtown, it has a Spanish feel. The town square was again the Plaza Bolivar, featuring a statue of Simon Bolivar. It was getting close to Christmas and the red flowers we saw were Poinsettias. The Universidad de Los Andes is one of the oldest Universities in South America and this is where he met Jose Rondon. Merida is home to a very famous ice cream parlour, the Heladeria Coromoto. This is in the Guinness book of records and offers over 900 flavours of ice cream. Some of the examples on offer were fig, trout, orange, "21st Century", "la bamba", "el touriste". "champones al vino" was mushrooms in wine and there was also pepino (cucumber) and cebolla (onion).

He stayed with Enrique, who was a retired university professor. Enrique was terrified of all the problems with Chavez. He had studied at a prep school in England when aged 10-15, and had absorbed the English culture which was reflected in the possessions in his room. John had wanted to go on the Merida cable car (Teleferico de Merida) which is the highest and longest (12.5km) in the world, but Enrique said it was too dangerous because there were "men in the streets". When using the cable car, there are a few stations from top to bottom, and you are always made to wait 12-15 minutes at each station. This avoids climbing altitude too quickly. At the first stop at Barinitas, things were decked out in typical Venezuelan colours and it was quite a splendid gondola. They crossed over the Rio Charma. Between the first couple of stages there are a couple of towers, but higher up, the suspension distances becomes bigger. At 11000 feet the vegetation changes and he could see Espelitas in the distance. The last part is 2500 feet and you are looking directly across the rock face. It is quite spectacular, and at the highest stages, you are looking down on the clouds. There was an interesting sign illustrating the hazards of falling off the cliffs, and it was nice to see such a good handrail there. The stops are La Montaña (2436m), La Aguada (3452m), Loma Redonda (4045m) and Pico Espejo (4765m).

At 15000 feet, a plant which was 2 feet across and had yellow flowers was a *Lolicaria*. It has armoured stems and is part of the daisy family. The name is also the name of a genus of South American catfish so he had difficulty researching it. At the top, the mist comes down quite quickly. He had started the day at 9am and got to the top at 11am, but the mist started to draw in soon after. So you have to descend quite quickly to stay ahead of the mist, and he skipped getting out at the Loma Redonda station on the way down. A view showed a couple of lakes,

called "The Spectacles". There were example of shrubby vegetation and a lobelia which was 3 feet tall. At the base was a terrestrial orchid. If he had more time, he would probably have found more plants, but he was conscious of the need to descend. He found more examples of *Echeveria bicolor*. *Werneria pygmaea* had leaves arranged as pairs of fans and was at 13000 feet. He returned to Barinitas.

Now looking at the Xerophytic region (Lagunillas), this is an area in the rain shadow and is at altitudes from 2000 to 5500 feet. The soil is more sandy and the rainfall is around 20 inches a year. The area has very different flora. They travelled on the road to Jiji and were at 5000 feet. These pictures were taken as slides - if he had a digital camera, he would have taken many more shots. We saw bracket fungi and also *Rhipsalis*. *Rhipsalis* is the only cactus which is native to both old and new worlds. The stems will branch from their ends. A plant with rounded leaves was a *Peperomia*. This genus is in the *Guide to Shows* and it can have quite succulent fleshy leaves. It was growing with other epiphytes on the trees and has a compound group of flowers - he didn't know this at the time, so the flowers which look like a pipe cleaner were out of focus. On the ground was *Opuntia depauperata* with yellow flowers - it reminded him of something he'd seen in Ecuador, *Opuntia pubescens*. It is very unusual to see it in flower. We saw another picture of a tree with epiphytes hanging down and another *Rhipsalis baccifera* which was slightly hairier, and a fern. Spanish moss - *Tillandsia usneoides* - was abundant. With all the cattle there were some mushrooms growing and we saw one with a girdle around the centre of the stem.

At Jiji, there was a nice church painted in white and blue, and a view up the street showed other buildings in similar colours. With petrol being so cheap, people from Merida go out for a drive to this sort of place - driving is cheap, but food is expensive. A souvenir shop proved to have just tat. An *Asclepias* had red and yellow flowers and was probably related to the things we grow in our gardens. "El trolle" was a trolley bus. One of the good things Chavez has done was to improve public transport, and there is now a railway from Caracas to Valencia.

We were now in the zone of xerophytic vegetation, south of Merida. Agua Dolce means "sweet water" and referred to a stream at the bottom of a valley. Where it's wet, you get some luxuriant vegetation. *Pilosocereus tillianus* is normally a North Brazillian cactus which goes up as far as Mexico. The version had feathery yellow spines. According to Rondon, this is an endemic plant, but in the new Lexicon it's

been placed under *P. lanuginosus*. The only pictures he has found of the latter are from Daniela Zappi and John thought that was a different plant. The plants here were 12-15 foot tall. *Cereus hexagonus* is very widespread, and found in several countries including Northern Brazil. It is used as fencing. We saw a Kalanchoe and John mentioned this was from the Bryophyllum section. The standard Kalanchoes such as the flaming katy have star-shaped flowers which look upwards, but Bryophyllum have hanging flowers which look downwards. It forms plantlets on the edge of the leaves and was probably a garden escapee. Next was a Tillandsia or bromeliad of some, growing on the rocks. It seemed to be forming stolons on stems from the main plant. Ian Acton suggested it could also be an Aechmea. Next was Furcraea – these are quite common in South America, especially in Ecuador. They form tall flower spikes which can be 20-30 foot high, with little white flowers. *Equisetum giganteum* is a horsetail – this one grows to 20 feet and it is a very ancient plant, propagating from spores carried in cones. It grows near water. *Thunbergia alata* is the “black eyed” Susan vine.

In the University of Los Andes botanic gardens, he found plants of *Pilosocereus tillianus* and these looked very attractive when young. It is quite tender and not an easy plant from seed. *Aloe vera* (or *barbadiensis*) has been in cultivation and use for a long time - there are pictures of it on papyrus from 5000 years old and no-one really knows where it originally came from. Next was a *Pilosocereus*, possibly *P. arrabidaei*. He had seen it on a cape south of Rio de Janeiro and also in southern Bahia. *Jatropha multifida* comes from Salta province in Argentina and is perhaps not as tender as the others. All have nasty sap. It could make a nice ornamental and we could see that it was pollinated by butterflies. The seed pods are always larger than the flowers. With *Pereskia grandiflora*, DNA analysis has shown that the South American ones are quite distinct from the North American ones. It has lovely pink flowers, and strange fruits which can form further buds on old fruit.

He still hadn't found the plant he was really looking for. He went to the Lagunillas Indian Market – and told people what he was looking for. Someone said “well it grows behind here”. So he went over to town rubbish dump and found it, amongst dry shrubby vegetation. The plant was *Subpilosocereus repandus* – which has gone back into *cereus* so for once, we have a shorter name. It forms a trunk and then branches from a point partway up the stem – and we could see the contrast, when compared to a plant such as *Stenocereus griseus* which branches almost from the ground. This is one of the few

plants which has not been renamed in the new Lexicon. It has quite interesting flower buds with red spines and then the flower bud expands. He thinks it flowers at night. *Opuntia caribaea* was originally in *Austrocylindropuntia* but now seems to be in *Cylindropuntia*. If you back into this, you'll know about it – it has yellow flowers and red fruits. Amazingly the type species of *Mammillaria*, which was first discovered in the West Indies - *M. mammillaris* – is also found here. It doesn't like temperatures less than 8°C and can grow to quite a size, reaching 10 inches across.

A plant that looks like *Echinocereus ingens* as a young plant but actually is a *Melocactus* is *Melocactus schatzlii*. This is one of the trickiest of the *Melocacti*. It was only described in the 1990s. It has a very characteristic appearance since it has a pure white cephalium. Also the seeds are rugose (pimply).

They proceeded to San Cristobal which is almost on the border of Columbia and to Capacho / Libertad. They came across a bridge to nowhere – the roads on either side had been re-routed. John mentioned the bridge (Puente Libertador) had been designed by Eiffel, of Eiffel Tower fame. Enrique lives in Cordero and he was very nervous since there were elections that day - he was worried about possible bloodshed and murder but it was actually a very quiet place. We saw another town square (again Plaza Bolivar) and the church Maria. For 30 years the only way to get to the capital was a boat, now there's a highway. Gusman's house was nice – it was a private condominium. A plant which he thought was *Tecoyena* (?) had amazing seed pods which had double chambers making them look like hearts. There was a nice view from the back garden. There were also some wonderful birds (blue & yellow Tanager) which could be attracted by putting out a banana. There was an orchid on the tree, and a unidentified plant that blooms early in the mornings.

At 7500 feet, *Alstromerias* were being grown as cut flowers. These looked very healthy. They are one of his favourite plants and will produce flowers throughout the year, but you must cut them down after flowering, also cut any stems that are not flowering, and water heavily. We saw a nice example of *Echeveria bicolor*. Back in San Cristobal, we saw *Pilosocereus lanuginosus*. This has a blue body and creamy yellow spines whereas the *tillianus* is a hairy yellow plant with only a slight separation of the ribs. At 2000 feet, near Peracal, he found *Hylocereus lemairei* growing amongst the trees. This is a forest cactus and the spines help the plant to support itself by digging into the trees as it grows.

The very last thing he did in the countryside was to walk from El Valle to Pan De Azucar. This is a pleasant walk on Sunday morning after church. He found *Passiflora mixta* which has a very long tube – 4 inches, and the 3-inch flowers are held at 90 degrees to the stems. It is in the Tocsonia section. A plant from the Melastomataceae (same family as Tibouchina) had interesting leaves, with ribs that run parallel to the edge of the leaf. It had pretty pink flowers and is perhaps the South American equivalent of an Azalea. He found large colonies of *Echeveria recurvata* here, with some being 4 inches across. They become much more straggly in this country. A Lycopodium growing on a shaded bank was a club moss – *Crassula lycopodioides (muscosa)* is named after this shape. There were also some terrestrial orchids. Pernettya are shrubs with berries but you have to buy it in fruit to know what colour it will be. You also need male and female plants to get the berries. The talk ended with the picture of another Hypericum.

Vinay Shah

Table Show Results

There were 16 entries in the September table show.

	Cacti – Gymnocalycium	Succulents – Mesembs
Open	(1) I Biddlecombe G. saglionis	(1) I Biddlecombe Trichodiadema bulbosum
	(2) B Beckerleg G. strigilium	(2) B Beckerleg Conophytum tischeri
	(3)	(3) I Biddlecombe Conophytum herreanthus
Intermediate	(1) B Beckerleg G. spegazzinii	(1) B Beckerleg Lithops bromfieldii
	(2) I Biddlecombe G. quehlianum	(2) I Biddlecombe Titanopsis hugo-schlechteri
	(3) T Radford G. quehlianum	(3) I Biddlecombe Lithops bromfieldii

Ivor Biddlecombe

Bookworm Corner

What a fantastic Indian summer we are having. The swallows and house martins are still moving out over the coast with the first migrant ducks being represented by a few teal bobbing

about in the estuary. The first of the wintering Brent geese arrived overnight on Thursday 26th September with 25 birds counted on my morning dog walk, next day the flock had increased to 60. By November we should have several hundred down Southampton Water. Remarkably, they have travelled from the breeding grounds of the high arctic tundra in Siberia via Finland and Denmark to reach us and will stay until mid-April.

In the cactus house the lithops are now flowering, with the turbinicarpus having yet another (4th) flush of pretty flowers. Many of the succulents are visibly growing at the moment including my senecios, echeverias and Mark's aeoniums. So we have yet more potting up to do!

'ENJOYED THE LECTURE? THEN ENJOY THE BOOK!'

September

John Hughes gave an interesting presentation on 'Alpines and Cacti of Merida, Venezuela' Although we do not have any books on alpines it would be worth paying a visit to your local public library. As to the cacti of Venezuela the following book should be of interest, '**The Genus Matucana**' (Bergman R) with general books including '**The New Cactus Lexicon**' (Hunt D.) and '**Cacti –the Illustrated Dictionary**' (Preston-Mafham R. & K).

October

This month we are travelling to '5 Star American Habitats' with Martin Doorbar. A book with habitat photographs in south-west United States is '**Cacti and Succulents in Habitat**' (Preston-Mafham K.). This book mentions the locations the author found the plants and includes a map at the beginning of the chapter with places to visit annotated. Some species specific books worth looking at include '**The Genus Echinocereus**' (Taylor N.) and '**Mammillaria – Cactus File Handbook 6**' (Pilbeam J.). All of these books can be found in the '**Featured Book Corner**'.

Sue Wilson

Next Month's Meeting

The next branch meeting will be held on November 5th and will feature Terry Smale talking about plants from the Cape region of South Africa.

There is no table show in November.

Forthcoming Events

Fri	11 th	Oct	Southampton	Branch Dinner @ Luzborough House
Sat	12 th	Oct	Isle of Wight	Off The Beaton Track 1 (Rodney Sims)
Sat	19 th	Oct	Portsmouth	European Collections (Ian Woolnough)
Tue	5 th	Nov	Southampton	Where do Cape Succulents Grow? (Terry Smale)
Sat	9 th	Nov	Isle of Wight	Asclepiadaceae (Tom Radford)
Tue	19 th	Nov	Southampton	Branch Committee Meeting
Sat	23 rd	Nov	Portsmouth	Zone 11 Quiz (hosted by Portsmouth Branch)
Tue	3 rd	Dec	Southampton	Annual General Meeting, followed by Christmas Social
Sat	7 th	Dec	Isle of Wight	Annual General Meeting & Christmas Social
Sat	14 th	Dec	Portsmouth	Annual General Meeting & American Supper

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