

# British Cactus & Succulent Society

## Southampton & District Branch Newsletter

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### Editorial

The weather at the end of October and the start of November has been extremely mild and although many of the trees have shed their leaves, it barely feels like autumn, let alone that winter might be just round the corner. In my garden, a couple of dahlias are still flowering, of course they will go black and die as soon as we get a decent frost.

A few mesembs are in flower at the moment but it was rather a surprise for two cacti to join in. On October 20<sup>th</sup>, there were flowers open on my *Borzicactus samaipatanus* and more surprisingly, on *Rebutia* cv. 'Apricot Ice'. I have stopped watering everything a few weeks ago but the continued warm/sunny weather does make one wonder whether the plants need one more drink.

### Announcements

Next month is our **Annual General Meeting**, which will be followed by an American supper. As is usual, there will be no table show, library or plant sales at the AGM. However, please do bring along some food or nibbles for the American supper. There will also be a lucky dip "bran tub" where members can exchange gifts. Further details of this are given on the back page.

**Nomination forms** for the Committee are available on the front table. As I mentioned in the committee minutes last month, Philip Clemow has indicated that he'd like to retire from the post of Librarian. We would certainly welcome some new faces on the committee!

The branch programme for next year is being prepared and will be available shortly. One decision which has already been taken is that there will be no branch meeting in January 2008 since the first Tuesday falls on New Years Day.

### Last Month's Meeting

#### Plants of Interest

Margaret Corina had brought along a couple of South African bulbs which were in flower. *Nerine filifolium* had hardly grown any leaves but the plant featured star-shaped pink flowers. *Strumaria discifera* is a small growing Amaryllid which had white flowers. She mentioned that her bulbs flower from now until June, when the cactus start to take over. This comment – and the small size of the flowers on the plants – prompted some silliness from the audience – "Aren't there any with big flowers?", and "What are you doing wrong to stop your cacti flowering until June?"

Ivor Biddlecombe had brought a large number of Lithops plants and seedlings, just to show the variation you can get when growing from seed. The plants are just greenish blobs when young but virtually every one is different when they grow up and start to develop the body markings. With some species such as *L. pseudotruncatella*, the seedlings appear to be similar, but on close inspection you are still likely to find subtle variations.

Ivor mentioned he had also tried an experiment by using some bone meal and also blood-fish-bone as feed for some of the more mature Lithops plants and this seemed to have boosted them – the heads were bigger than similar-aged plants which had not been fed. However, he wasn't sure what would happen next year – would the plants collapse because the growth proved to be too lush and tender, or would the plants carry on growing strongly?

The plants he had brought along included *L. dorotheae* (+ seedlings), *L. hookeri*, *L. pseudotruncatella*, *L. karasmontana*, *L. dinteri*, *L. aucampiae* and *Dinteranthus van zylui*. There was also an assembly of the green-bodied Lithops

cultivars which some people like to grow – these included *Lithops salicola* ‘Malachite’, *Lithops fulviceps* ‘aurea’, *Lithops salicola* ‘Malachite’ x *Lithops julii* v. *fulleri*, and *L. bromfieldii* v. *insularis* cv. ‘Sulphurea’.

### **Confessions of a Cactogenarian**

Peter Down introduced our speaker for the evening, Anthony Mitchell, who lives on the Isle of Wight. Most of us knew that Anthony has spent many years in South Africa and of his interest and knowledge of the “other” succulents. This talk was going to be a departure from his normal habits and Anthony said that he would talk about his first love, namely cacti. He mentioned that there were no habitat photos – since he has never been on a trip to a cactus habitat, but he hopes there is still time to put this right.

His interest commenced during the closing years of the Second World War. Having watched Disney’s epic cartoon ‘Fantasia’ he saw representations of *Carnegiea gigantea*, and when he was about 6 years old, he told his mother that he was fascinated by cacti. She proceeded to make a plasticine model of a prickly pear. This was not like any of the cacti in Fantasia and it indicated that at this stage, his mother knew more about cacti than he did!

As Britain made a slow and austere recovery during the post war period, he was living in West London and knew Shepherd’s Bush well. Under the shadow of the railway bridge which takes the Metropolitan Line over Uxbridge road was a florist’s shop called Snelgroves, and he used to peer into the window trying to spot the occasional cactus plant. In the summer of 1950, he spent 1s 6d on his first plant which was an *Opuntia salmiana*. When he got it home, a joint fell off and he attempted to stick this back on using some sticky tape! Over the next few months, the plant grew a long snaky stem as it wasn’t getting enough light – but the adventure had begun.

Shortly after that, the family moved from East Acton to Orpington in Kent. His school years were not particularly happy but the cacti were an escape route. The first book he got was Edgar Lamb’s “The Flowering of your Cacti” which influenced him greatly. He acquired a flat nose from peering through the florist’s window and spent pounds and pounds on buying the plants. However, some of them didn’t live very long - he was forever repotting them and this didn’t help them settle. “Who re-pots them in nature?” he asked. He went on to mention that he lost a lot of plants in 2003 due to their roots getting roasted during the particularly hot summer. In

habitat, the plant roots reach deep into the soil and even with high surface temperatures, the plants can survive much better.

On the table were some of stems of *Haageocereus chalaensis* – this plant was once a nice show worthy specimen – however, the whole thing had collapsed into pieces when the roots got cooked and the base rotted.

In the 50s. he continued to acquire plants and was growing them in a south-facing window. In the winter the sun is low in the sky and could enter the window easily but in the summer it is high in the sky and can really only illuminate a strip a few inches deep. He eventually got a 10’ x 8’ greenhouse. It was also around this time that he started making concrete pots. He had trouble getting hold of plastic pots and the traditional clay pots used to suck the moisture out of the roots too much.

His success in the hobby didn’t take off until 1955, when he left school. He started to get seeds from a German supplier who featured seeds from Friedrich Ritter. One of the first plants he grew was *Arequipa leucotricha* (*Oreocereus leucotrichus*), and there were all sorts of other unheard-of plants to try out. *Pachypodium namaquanum* seeds were one Deutsche Mark each and he managed to germinate some – but they didn’t get beyond the seedling stage since he did not have the knowledge or resources to grow them on. In 1956 he started seed growing on a larger scale and ventured into Copiapoas. He shuddered to think of the amount of stuff he lost. He used Chinosol to ward off damping-off disease, but later on he did a test with mung beans and various dilutions of Chinosol, and learnt that no matter how weak it was, it inhibited germination – the only batch which germinated was the control. He now uses pure or distilled water for watering his seedlings.

Anthony spent time away from home on Army service and also in South Africa, and during this period, his late father looked after his collection for him. Despite not knowing a great deal about the plants, he had learnt enough and did a reasonable job.

With the changes in cultivation and moving from terracotta pots to plastic to concrete, there were fluctuations in the fortunes of the plants and some did well while others didn’t. Sometimes he was just too impatient, as was the case with *Opuntia* (*Tephrocactus*) *leoncito* which is very slow growing above ground since it spends most of the time developing a large subterranean root.

Anthony then proceeded to show us some slides, showing us some early images of his collection. The first slide dated from 1956 and had survived well. We saw three plants of *Opuntia pachypus* and a general view of the newly erected greenhouse. We also saw *Lobivia caineana* followed by *Rebutia krainziana* which has stunning flowers – Anthony mentioned that some now think it is a hybrid. *Echinopsis tubiflora* had a white flower.

He bedded out some of the larger plants. There was a rather active *Opuntia imbricata* in the corner – and another picture of it when fully grown. Eventually it had to be cut down. In the winter, this plant shrinks and the spines retract into a sheath and it can just about be handled, however in the summer the spines protrude from the sheath and the plant is much more dangerous. We also saw *Opuntia bergeriana*.

*Weingartia cumingii* (*Rebutia neocumingii*) had flowers with a lovely deep yellow colour – a form which he has not seen elsewhere since. Likewise, he had a red *Parodia schwebsiana* and he hasn't seen that colour either. Once word of warning about this plant – if it goes off its roots, throw it out - it will not re-root. He's tried twice and failed each time.

He mentioned how some plants changed their behaviour on being moved from Kent to the Isle of Wight. With *Opuntia leucotricha*, the plants used to put out just one or two flowers in October – but after moving to the Isle of Wight, the plant flowered constantly from March onwards. Similar things happened to his South African bulbs. David Neville mentioned that Graham Charles had told him that in habitat, Matucanas are always in flower through their growing season, even at different times of the year.

We also saw a *Notocactus leninghausii* with 2 offsets, and the flower buds and yellow flowers. We also saw a fruit on this plant and Anthony mentioned that when ripe the seeds cascade down the side of the plant. Other pictures featured *Notocactus scopa* and a grey *Graptopetallum*. The flowers of *Gasteria armstrongii* were orange and a curious shape – indeed the genus is named after the shape of the flowers. *Opuntia platyacatha* is very slow, as is *Copiapoa cinerea* – having germinated it in 1955, after eight years it had a 1¼" diameter body and was quite happy in a 2 inch pot. The plant body was bright green and contrasted well with the black spines. We also saw *Copiapoa haseltoniana*. Off to the side of one of the pictures was *Arequipa spinosissima*. There was a white-spined *Mammillaria senilis*, and another shot featured two *Lophophoras* and a *Leuchtenbergia*. There was also a double headed *Dinteranthus*.

A *Trichocereus* from the Famatina area was a Ritter find (FR426), and we also saw an *Erdisia*, *Trichocereus atacamensis* and *Oreocereus celsianum*.

After returning from South Africa, he reorganised his cactus collection and also decided to start using concrete pots. Later in the talk he mentioned that these were not cheap to make but worth the effort. He uses a mould and has made several hundred of them to date.

We saw a *Trichocaulon* which had been grown from seed he collected in South Africa. *Mammillaria senilis* was in flower with the characteristic red flowers. *Echinocereus pectinatus* had large pink flowers and *Erdisia (corryocactus) brachycladus* had red flowers. A plant of *Notocactus leninghausii* was in the process of falling over, so he referred to it as *Notocactus "leaning-haussi"*. He mentioned that the offsets are connected by pencil thin runners to the main stem. *Seticereus icosagonus* has golden spines and fruits which are sweet smelling and delicious. *Oreocereus tacnaensis* is hairless. There were a select few plants which needed high light levels on the top shelf, and these included *Mammillaria senilis*, *Copiapoa carrizalensis* and *Copiapoa gigantea*. Anthony mentioned that an abbreviation of BCW refers to field numbers assigned by Beckett, Cheese and Watson. According to Paul Klaassen, John Watson now lives in Argentina.

After the break, we moved forward to 1985 and it was time to say goodbye to Orpington and hello to the Isle of Wight. Anthony mentioned that he got a new greenhouse in the following summer. There was a Siberian winter around this time and he had to employ all sorts of measures to try and insulate the plants from the cold.

A plant he brought back from his second trip to South Africa was *Ceropegia ampliata*. We saw an excellent example of this, trained to a tee-pee shape and featuring around 30 of the unusual green/white flowers. Anthony said this was the best way of growing this plant, but it would need re-propagating every 4-5 years. It was possible to pollinate this species to produce seeds. He mentioned that he hates flies but doesn't mind them if they are pollinating his *Sarcocaulons*. We also saw a close up of a fly with the yellow pollinia in its mouth. The plants have hairs in the flowers which point in one direction and which help to trap the fly, improving the chances of the flower being pollinated.

Moving back to cacti, we saw *Tephrocactus (Opuntia) russelli* which had been obtained in 1953 from WT Neale of Worthing (eventually taken over by Edgar Lamb). *Opuntia platyacantha* has vicious spines and we saw the new growth and buds and flowers - the open flowers are a caramel colour. He had also grown *Cleistocactus micropetalis* from seed - the green flowers are ¾" long and they barely open. After just a day or two when you think the flowers might open further, they just wither and drop off. He eventually chopped up the plant and gave the cuttings to his "friends". *Trichocereus vollianus* is unusual that it grows new spines on old areoles. (Some opuntias also do this.)

*Erdisia brachyclada* had orange flowers. This is a plant which Ritter did not re-collect and which he has not seen in anyone else's collections. It occurs in central Peru. The stems are modest and the flowers nothing special but the root system is enormous - a true cactus caudiciform. His other plant of this species had red flowers. The plants form fruits which are like gooseberries in both appearance and taste.

*Haageocereus chalaensis* (FR187) is from the Peruvian coast and is now referred to as *H. decumbens*. It was shy at flowering but eventually did produce modest flowers which were night flowering. It can set fruit on its own and the pink seed pods are 2 inches across. The fruits last for months. *Trichocereus "defamatina"* had flowers 7" long and 4½" across - they last for exactly a day and a half. The plant flowered in dribs or drabs, with no more than four flowers open at a time. The perfume from the flower resembles melons, which made him wonder what pollinates them. The fruits are scarlet-red and he counted 1350 seeds in just one pod. In habitat, the ants and mice depend on this!

Anthony commented that after moving from Orpington to the Isle of Wight, he estimated that for every flower he had in Orpington, he got 4 times as many in the Isle of Wight. This was partly due to the lower latitude but more likely due to the wider spread of temperatures from day to night because of the sea breeze - this is closer to what the plants experience in habitat.

*Denmoza erythrocephala* has a strange pink flower which makes it a puzzle as to which group it belongs in. A picture showed *Echinocereus subinermis* in its prime, with 10 yellow flowers fully open despite it being cloudy. The flowers opened even flatter the next day when it was sunnier. The fruit is green and the seeds are dispersed in the same manner as pomegranates, where the outer skin of the fruit disintegrates.

A photo of *Mammillaria fraileana* showed 2 plants in the same pot. This was not an attempt to gain advantage in a show entry but rather to assist with cross-pollination. The attractive white/pink flower last for a few days and the berries last for months. In his view the real star is *Mammillaria senilis*. It grows at a high altitude in Mexico and is therefore borderline hardy. It needs lots of sun and fresh air. An overhead picture showed 10 red flowers on his original plant which had survived from 1956. Another shot showed the fruit. Anthony advised that this species should not be watered until the flower buds are clear of the spines - otherwise premature watering causes the buds to be strangled before they can develop.

*Neochilenia reichei* has a green flower and is very slow growing. Next were *Mammillaria fraileana* and *Pyrrhocactus horridus* - the latter being a BCW plant from their 1972 expedition to South America. This plant was just a dense mass of criss-crossing spines.

*Gymnocalycium cardenasianum* hails from Bolivia and also has strong spination. The plant seems to grow in spasms - it is devoid of spines then flowers for a few months and then starts growing some spines. Do not attempt to pull off the flowers or it will leave a scar - wait for the flower to shrivel. Courtesy of Peter Collard (who had another example of this plant), he was able to cross pollinate and obtained a bluish fruit.

His plant of *Copiapoa cinerea* grown from seed in 1955 came to a tragic end due to the fore-mentioned hot summer in 2003 when a number of his plants died. The plant flowered for the first time after 33 years, and we saw a small flower amongst the black spines. Another *Copiapoa* had grown a strange carbuncle near the base of the plant. He was wondering whether the tissue in this area would yield anything interesting, but a post-mortem carried out after the plant's demise did not reveal anything unusual.

Anthony mentioned that one has to be careful with the first watering of any plant after the winter rest. The plant's sap is more concentrated than usual and hence it will tend to draw in a lot of water due to osmotic pressure and end up splitting its body. This means it is better to commence watering with a solution which itself has a concentration of salts.

His favourite *Copiapoa* was *C. haseltoniana* - some say it is just a variant of *C. cinerea* but he thinks it is distinct. We finished with a photo showing 2-3 flowers at the crown of the plant. He commented on

the small flowers and Paul Klaassen mentioned that this was perhaps related to the low amount of moisture available where these plants grow.

Overall, this was an interesting talk which mapped out one person's collection over a 50 year period. Anthony's comments and observations also prompted a fair amount of discussion amongst the audience.

*Vinay Shah*

**Table Show Results**

There were 24 entries in the table show at the October meeting.

	<b>Cacti – Mammillaria</b>	<b>Succulents – Haworthia &amp; Gasteria</b>
Open	(1) B Beckerleg Mammillaria petersonii	(1) B Beckerleg Poellnitzia rubriflora
	(2) A Grech Mammillaria candida	(2) J Roskilly Haworthia tranlucens
	(3) A Grech Mammillaria sp.	(3) P Clemow Haworthia viscosa f. asperiuscula
Intermediate	(1) A Grech Mammillaria sp.	(1) B Beckerleg Haworthia maughanii
	(2) B Beckerleg Mammillaria lenta	(2) P Clemow Haworthia otzenii
	(3) A Grech Mammillaria sp.	(3) J Roskilly Haworthia retusa

*Ivor Biddlecombe*

**Some Cartoons**

These are some pictures drawn by Jim Roskilly many years ago. He provided me with a scan of them and I hope they print out OK.

The general heading was ... *Have you noticed how some cactophiles bear a resemblance to their plants?*

**Chris Tate**



**Father Mal O'Cactus**



## Lt. Col. Back-Berg



*Jim Roskilly*

## Next Month's Meeting

Our final meeting of 2007 will be held on December 4<sup>th</sup>. This will be our **Annual General Meeting** followed by the **Christmas Social**. After receiving some reports from this year's Committee and choosing the Committee for next year, we'll get on with the real business of enjoying some food and drink and chatting with fellow branch members.

Drinks will be provided by the branch, but please do bring along some items of food for the buffet table.

There will also be a "bran tub" lucky-dip. Simply bring along a wrapped present (suggested value is £2 or therabouts) and place it in the tub at the start of the meeting. Later in the evening you'll get a chance to take a present out of the tub.

In order to give the Committee members a chance to participate in the festivities, there will be no plant sales, sundries sales, table show or library at the December meeting. (Although Philip will be willing to accept back any library books which you wish to return).

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Finally, for Committee members, a reminder that a Committee meeting will be held on the 19<sup>th</sup> of November. **Please bring along your annual reports** so that these can be included in the December newsletter. Any format (handwritten, typewritten, or as a file on a floppy disk) is acceptable. Alternatively, reports can be emailed to my email address, as shown on the front of the newsletter.

### Forthcoming Events

Fri 16 <sup>th</sup>	Nov	Isle of Wight	"Pelargoniums and Gardens" – Ron Mitchell
Sat 17 <sup>th</sup>	Nov	Portsmouth	AGM
Mon 19 <sup>th</sup>	Nov	Southampton	Branch Committee Meeting (@79 Shirley Avenue)
Sat 1 <sup>st</sup>	Dec	Portsmouth	Christmas Social / American Supper
Tue 4 <sup>th</sup>	Dec	Southampton	AGM & Christmas Social / American Supper
Fri 21 <sup>st</sup>	Dec	Isle of Wight	AGM & Christmas Social / American Supper
Tue 1 <sup>st</sup>	Jan	Southampton	No branch meeting – 1 <sup>st</sup> meeting of 2008 will be held on 5 <sup>th</sup> Feb

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