

# British Cactus & Succulent Society

## Southampton & District Branch Newsletter

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<b>Editorial .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Last Month's Meeting - AGM.....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Snippets.....</b>	<b>3</b>
Rise of the plant smugglers.....	3
<b>Next Month's Meeting .....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Forthcoming Events.....</b>	<b>4</b>

## Editorial

Happy New Year to everyone. I hope everyone had a good break over Christmas, with the timing of Christmas and the New Year, I was able to have 2 weeks off from work using 7 days of my vacation.

The weather has turned cold with snowfalls in the north and nighttime temperatures below freezing across most of the country and forecasts indicate this will continue for a few days.

## Last Month's Meeting - AGM

David Neville and Jane Williams opened the meeting. Jane said we had received apologies of absence from Alice Jankovec and Ben Turner and Peter Down. Our chairman Catherine had her baby in November and wasn't allowed to drive at present but she hoped to come to meetings next year. Peter Down had fallen at home and he had to have surgery. Hopefully he will be able to attend meetings in the new year.

It was Peter who started Southampton branch back in 1954, after putting adverts in the Echo and also knocking on the door of anyone who had a cactus plant in their window. He was the founder member. As President, Peter normally says a few words at the AGM, but since he has been hospitalised, we did not have a report from him. With the chairman, Catherine has been busy with other matters of course, and also it was also her first year of doing the job. Next was David as secretary and his write-up was in the newsletter. He said his report was doom and gloom because he had been concerned at the falling attendance at our branch meetings and tonight's AGM was a case in point – there were only ten people here which is around half the attendance we would normally get. At the beginning

of the year we were getting between 20 and 25 people but recently the number has been down to 20 and this is the lowest number for over 15 years. He didn't know what the problem was. We have had less visiting speakers nowadays because the BCSS publish a list of speakers but since the pandemic that list has shrunk by two thirds so we only have a small list to choose from now. Some older speakers have stopped giving talks, and with our meeting being on a Tuesday it makes it more difficult for someone with a job - even some of our members have a hard time getting to the meeting sometimes because they live a fair distance away. Richard asked whether we should re-consider which day of the week we should hold the meeting on. David said he didn't feel any weekday would help matters and he would have a problem attending at the weekend, as would Jane. Does anyone have any ideas of why attendance is dropping? In his report he had mentioned that a new secretary might rejuvenate things but no one has expressed an interest in taking on the role. I mentioned that we make it convenient for people to attend – we don't charge a fee to attend meetings, refreshments are provided free of charge and we also don't charge for book loans from the library. So people shouldn't have to spend a large amount of money to attend. Paul Maddison said he had missed meetings due to holidays and he wondered if the BCSS Zoom meetings which used to clash with our meeting had caused attendance to be lower, but we doubted that would be the case. Portsmouth Branch were suffering from low attendance but things have improved - they scrapped their August meeting which had low attendance due to people being on holiday, and they have also recently removed their December meeting, with their AGM now being held in November.

We are not short of members on the membership list, but the majority just don't come to meetings. Jane wondered whether it was sending the membership emails asking why they weren't attending and David said he has asked this question and not received a response. In the past we have posted the December newsletter to members who had lapsed or who weren't coming to the meetings, and this is something we could do, it would cost around £30. David said when he sends out the email notice for the January meeting, he will ask the

members again and include a link to the branch website so that members would be reminded of the programme of meetings. Paul wondered if the new members were not local - in theory we should only get notified of members in Hampshire and they should be in this region or potentially in the New Forest. Mike asked what Portsmouth did to improve their attendance and David said he wasn't really sure. They do hold two shows a year although the last show was the smallest show he can remember - the number of people with large collections is reducing all the time and in our branch, we don't have any members with large collections - Ivor Biddlecombe and Bruce Beckerleg used to support the shows but Ivor passed away and Bruce's bad back meant he gave up his entire collection. Brexit has stopped the entry of plants from Europe (unless they are from certified sources with phytosanitary certificates) and this has reduced the number of plants coming in and David mentioned there are also restrictions on getting seeds so the situation going forwards for people to amass choice plants and build up collections is not as good as it once was.

The next person who would provide a report was the treasurer but Alice had not sent a report, although she had emailed some comments on the day of the meeting and David read these out. She hasn't been able to attend any meetings during the year. We had asked the membership if anyone wanted to train up as a treasurer but we've not had a response. Alice has two children and her father-in-law is ill, and she's also running a business from home.

"I can't believe that yet another year has passed. Sadly in 2024 I've had to concentrate on developing my business, looking after poorly family members and operate as a taxi service for my two kids. And as a result, I have not been able to attend any of the meetings.

Based on information available to myself I have compiled preliminary year end accounts. Due to a rise in the cost of hall hire and higher travel expenses for visiting speakers, our current balance of cash & current account is now low at £83. This balance I believe is as at 31/08/24 and they should be some income due from the September meeting. Luckily the interest rates have now recovered a bit and the interest we receive on our savings now averages about £30 a month, covering most of the hall hire. Our savings balance has gone from £6,933 to £7,557. I am hoping to send of my data to Colin (our Auditor) to get profit and loss accounts drawn up.

Wishing you all great meeting, Merry Christmas and Happy New Year."

Our Auditor is a chartered accountant who used to be a branch member who lived in Bursledon (Colin Bielckus) and he used to come to our meetings - however the family moved to Estepona on the Costa Del Sol and so now we email them the data and they still do the accounts for us.

Ben Turner had submitted a plant sales report and this was in the newsletter. He has not attended the last three meetings and David thought he might be in the middle of changing jobs, but was hopeful of returning to full attendance in 2025. Ben had thanked Ted Smith and Ian Acton for supporting his plant sales. David asked whether I had any comments on the website and the newsletters. There wasn't much to say. I gave a talk on internet resources a couple of months ago and we did view the online branch newsletters during that session. All the newsletters are out there arranged by date, but I mentioned perhaps an index to them might make it easier for people to find a talk of interest. We do need to modernise the template used for the website to use the BCSS-recommended template rather than the custom design which we currently use - I just need to find a few hours to do this work.

David moved on to discuss the nominations for the 2025 committee. Catherine had indicated she was going to stand down as chairman but she did say she will come to our meetings, so David thought it best that we re-elect her. Jane was willing to continue as vice-chairman. David would continue as secretary, and Alice would continue as treasurer. Vinay would continue handling the newsletter and website, Glenn would continue with catering and Ben would continue handling plant sales. We don't currently have a publicity officer - Robin Caddy did it for a couple of years. Richard White and Andy Rooke were general committee members. Lennie Kwan was on the committee previously but he hasn't been well recently and so can't always help at meetings. We still have little jobs that need doing at each meeting, such as selling the raffle tickets, getting names recorded in the attendance book and handing out the name labels and these would just be handled by whoever was free.

For the January members meeting we will have a talk from Tom Radford, Richard White was willing to do a talk as well, new member Stuart Arnold will do one, Ben Turner will also probably be able to one. David said he would like one more person. Following this, the AGM meeting was closed and David invited people to help themselves to the food and drink laid out on the side tables.

Mike Hill had brought along a new book titled "The Dry Exotic Garden" which was the book that Paul

Spracklin had told us about during his talk last year – it was published in September.

*Vinay Shah*

## Snippets

The following article was published by the Daily Mail on 8-Dec-2024. It highlights the issues in South Africa caused by plants being collected in habitat and being shipped to countries in Asia.

### ***Rise of the plant smugglers***

(Craze for rare succulents fuels black market - with collectable cacti selling for hundreds)

During the pandemic, while people were trapped in their homes, many developed new interests, from baking sourdough to collecting plants.

However, while enthusiasm for all things botanical may seem benign, some collectors' enthusiasm for the rarest succulents mean that some are selling online for hundreds - or even thousands - of dollars, such is the demand.

And this demand has had some serious consequences, according to the Times, which reported that in a bid to meet demand, criminals have broken international law, with suspected illegal harvesting and smuggling of plants being blamed for some species going extinct.

There are around 107 species of conophytum genus, a family of small succulents. Over the last five years, it's reported that some eight species have gone extinct, with a further 47 now critically endangered. The issue has become so serious, that there are people dedicated to fighting plant poachers, like David Whitehead, who concentrates his efforts in South Africa.

He told the Times that people seek out unusual plants for their ornamental value, noting that 'cacti, orchids, cycads and various carnivorous plants have been pushed much further towards extinction because of poaching'. David described the situation in South Africa as a 'crisis'.

Within the plant collecting community, which has a vibrant presence on social media, people will show off their purchases, with the rarest and most unusual acquisitions earning the buyer bragging rights - and increasing demand and prices - and driving the illegal smuggling of exotic species.

In an effort to tackle the illegal smuggling, the UK government has funded scientists at the Royal

Botanic Gardens at Kew, who have no easy task, with international criminal networks running the trade. When it comes to how much people will pay for some plants, the amounts can be eye-watering. Artist and ethically-sourced plant influencer Tyler Thrasher, from Oklahoma, told the Times that a special variety of monstera (more colloquially known as Swiss cheese plants) can sell for thousands, with those with leaves that have white patches the most desirable.

In South Africa, it is illegal to harvest plants of the conophytum species from the wild, but they are regularly poached. A staggering 22,000 of the plants were intercepted at Cape Town's international airport, bound for China, in boxes labelled as children's toys.

According to David Whitehead, conophytum are targeted so much because they 'have character' and because they are small, people can have a larger collection of them even if they don't have much space. The plants were sent to Kew, where they are carefully stored. According to scientists, they cannot simply be replanted in their native South Africa.

This is due to a variety of reasons: they could be carrying pathogens, which could introduce disease. Or, because their exact provenance is not known, they could be replanted in the wrong place, which, according to David Whitehead, 'would be damaging in itself'.

In addition, as they grow so slowly, once torn from the ground, it will take years for more to grow back, and restore the ecosystem. Because of demand for the plant, which used to be locally common, it is now 'pretty much extinct' according to Paul Rees, manager of Kew's tropical nursery.

Some 3,000 succulents are intercepted weekly by enforcement agencies in South Africa. According to Paul Rees, so many are confiscated that it is 'difficult to know what to do with them', and finding the manpower to pot and save them is a problem, leading to lost plants.

He points out that trends in plants come and go, giving the 19th century obsession with orchids as an example, leading to poaching. While some still happens, it has slowed down, with people now focusing on succulents. An alternative to poaching endangered plants is the artificial cultivation of them - something David Whitehead says is to be encouraged if it means there is less demand for poaching.

One of the ways scientists at Kew are trying to fight the illegal trade is using AI to scan the internet for talk about potential sales of endangered succulents. Called FloraGuard, and created by the University of Southampton and UK Border Force, it does have some limitations.

For example, it cannot access private groups on Facebook, only public-facing forums. However, it is useful in tracking trends in the trade, which species are most popular, how much money people are willing to pay, and where the plants come from

Another way Kew is trying to tackle the illegal trade is via a partnership with eBay: the organisations will work together to make it harder for vendors to sell illegally harvested plants. David Whitehead also suggests that buyers become better acquainted with signs that plants have been harvested from the wild. For example, an artificially propagated plant would be expected to be pristine, whereas a wild plant is more likely to show signs of wear and tear.

Ultimately, according to Paul Rees, the solution to the succulent crisis could simply be that they fall out of fashion, and people stop coveting them so much. He said: 'I remember when I was growing up, rock gardens were the fashion and everyone had one. Then they were the last thing that anyone wanted.'

*Daily Mail*

## Next Month's Meeting

Our next meeting will be held on **Tuesday February 4<sup>th</sup>** and it will feature a talk by Cliff Thompson.

He will be following up the talk that he gave us last February with a visit to another region of Brazil. Minas Gerais is a large state situated just north of Rio de Janeiro, and it has a population of around 20 million people. We should expect to see a selection of cacti, some of which might be epiphytic. Conditions in this state are quite warm, and the temperature ranges from a minimum of 10-15°C at night to perhaps 30-35°C in the warmest months.

## Forthcoming Events

Sat	11 <sup>th</sup>	Jan	Isle of Wight	Show and Tell. Bring along a plant and tell us all about it
Sat	18 <sup>th</sup>	Jan	Portsmouth	Why are there no fossil cacti? (David Martill)
Tue	4 <sup>th</sup>	Feb	Southampton	Brazil Part 2 - Minas Gerais (Cliff Thompson)
Sat	8 <sup>th</sup>	Feb	Isle of Wight	Preparing for the Spring Show
Sat	15 <sup>th</sup>	Feb	Portsmouth	A Personal Choice – cacti and succulents over the last 50 years (Tom Radford)

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

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