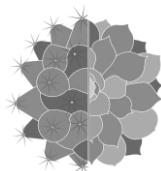


# British Cactus & Succulent Society

## Southampton & District Branch Newsletter

December 2023



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## Editorial

After the clock changes it's certainly dark in the evenings and we have had a few frosts. There is talk of a cold of snow and cold weather and this might possible materialise soon – we shall see. In the meantime, most of our plants will start their winter slumbers.

## AGM Reports

### Chairman's Report 2023

Welcome to our December 2023 AGM and Christmas Social. The branch committee which was much down in numbers last year was boosted by four new elected volunteers at the last AGM. Unfortunately one of these, Amelia Herbert had to step down for personal reasons during the year. The committee now stands at 9. This year we have had only one committee meeting, mainly in person but with two members attending by Zoom. There were also email exchanges throughout the year within the committee and with branch and BCSS members. It is with regret that I have decided for personal reasons to step down from the committee but hope to attend many future branch meetings.

Our branch meetings continue to be well attended and vibrant, with a wide range of topics covered in excellent presentations by committee, branch and invited speakers. I am convinced that this is not solely due to the free drinks and delicious cakes! I thank all who have put in the much effort that has kept our branch successful and buoyant during the year. As usual David our secretary has been unstinting in his efforts arranging our speaker program and driving our branch along. We extend to him our special thanks.

I wish all our branch members good health and happiness for 2024.

*Adrian Bailey*

### Secretary's Report 2023

Another year seems to have passed by all too quickly, and already we are looking forward to 2024. Branch activities have continued in a similar vein to last year, and although we have added a number of new people to the membership over the course of the year, attendance figures have failed to increase at meetings. We are averaging somewhere between 20 to 25 people at meetings, which means that we are still nowhere near the numbers that used to attend before the Covid epidemic of 2020/2021. Any suggestions on how to increase attendance would be welcomed.

I am pleased to say that the friendly atmosphere at our meetings has been maintained, and I hope that all new attendees feel welcomed when they first walk into any of our meetings. Can you all please make a special effort to chat to any new faces that appear throughout the coming year – many people find it quite daunting to walk into a room full of strangers.

Our Treasurer will have more detailed information in the accounts, but our attempts to gradually reduce the accumulated Branch funds by no longer charging for refreshments, and by not charging a sales commission on plants are hopefully starting to show results. Past efforts at publicity and promotion of the Branch at various local events slowly resulted in a growing and very healthy bank balance, mostly because of the large number of plants that we used to sell, but we have no need for funds over a certain level, and so we can afford to give these added benefits to all our members. Most Branches of the society charge a monthly attendance fee to everyone at their meetings to help finance their activities, but I am happy to say that this is something that we have never needed to do.

Compiling a list of speakers each year is becoming increasingly difficult, as I have mentioned before. The number of people willing to travel long

distances to talk to other Branches has fallen drastically in recent years. The fact that we meet during the working week means that some potential speakers are unable to travel because of work commitments. Holding meetings on a Saturday has occasionally been suggested, but many of us have numerous weekend commitments, and meeting halls are also much more difficult to hire at weekends.

At the AGM we will elect a new Committee for 2024; two people have notified me that they are planning to stand down from the Committee, and we offer grateful thanks to Adrian Bailey who has been our Chairman for 6 years, and to Amelia Herbert who joined us last year as Publicity Manager. Sadly as I write this report there have been no nominations or volunteers for new members to join the Committee, and so it seems likely that the size of the Branch Committee will reduce to its smallest number on record. This is not a healthy situation, and I hope that more of you will consider becoming involved and stepping forward to help with the running of our Branch in the future.

*David Neville*

### **Plant Sales Manager's Report 2023**

Plant sales were a strong activity for the branch in 2023 with around 11 different members bringing plants to sell over the course of the year. Out of this number, 5 members were regular sellers and we also handled plant sales for our visiting speakers. Overall, we turned over roughly £900.00 over the course of the year in member sales (this does not include any sales by visiting speakers).

Ian Acton very kindly brought along his superb plants to 8 of the meetings with all proceeds going to the branch. Ian's plant sales have raised a total of £154.00 for the branch and the plants are always immaculate and such high quality, with some usual and choice species as well. A big thank you to Ian for his kind generosity towards the branch and for allowing members to purchase such superb plants at very reasonable prices.

Thank you to everyone who brought plants to sell over the course of the year. Plant sales at the monthly meetings are a big draw for all our members and I hope we will continue to see a full sales table at our meetings in 2024.

*Ben Turner*

### **Last Month's Meeting**

Adrian introduced our speaker for November who was Ben Turner. He mentioned that Tresco was a helicopter ride from Penzance (28 miles). He also

said that if you were on Tresco and asked where to stay you might get a reply of "Go to Hell!". There is a hotel called Hell's Bay Hotel and Adrian did ask Ben if he had stayed there.

One plant of interest had been brought in, and this was *Aloe albiflora*, which Ben mentioned is from Madagascar. It forms clumps and has big roots which are almost tuberous. It is the only white flowered Aloe and has little stripes on the petals. Related plants include *A. perryi* and *A. bellatula*.

### **Inspiration from Tresco Abbey Gardens**

Ben asked if anyone had been to Tresco, and some hands did go up, including Jane. Ben said it was a beautiful island which was the 2<sup>nd</sup> largest of the Isles of Scilly Archipelago, and it was a distance of 28 miles from Land's End.

There are 5 inhabited islands, and St Mary's is the largest and it even has a road. St Martin, St Agnes, Bryher and Tresco make up the other inhabited islands. Being in the Gulf stream means that the islands do benefit from warmer weather than would be expected for the latitude. These islands also happen to have the biggest concentration of shipwrecks anywhere in the UK. In response to Adrian's earlier question, he said the Hells Bay hotel is actually on Bryher, which is west of Tresco and which gets the full force of the Atlantic weather. Tresco has an area of just over one square mile and it is home to the Abbey Garden. Tresco does not normally get any frosts - it has the same weather as the Mediterranean zones around the world. Ben showed the other mediterranean regions - namely the Mediterranean, California, Chile, Western Australia and the Western Cape. The gardens have quite a long history. They were part of the lost land of Lyonesse, and legend says that one man survived a flood which occurred in one day and one night. His family were the descendants (and linked to the Godolphin family of Penzance.) Thousands of years ago, there might have been a land bridge between the mainland and the islands, and there existed a larger island called Ennor but rising water caused the current islands to appear. At low tide you can walk between Tresco and Bryher. Apart from the 5 inhabited islands there are around a 100 uninhabited islands, starting with Samson and going down to just small specks of rock.

The Romans might have visited Tresco, but it was the Benedictine monks of Tavistock who built the Priory. They realised it was a wonderful, quiet and serene place but they introduced rabbits which became a pest. The gardens started with Augustus Smith, a wealthy landowner from Hertfordshire who

took out a 999 year lease on all the islands in around the 1830s. He was a philanthropist and set about reforming the islands and sent many people back to the mainland because the islands were overpopulated. The people survived on limpets (the chewiest of all the shellfish) and he also stopped the practice of wrecking. He built Tresco Abbey which is the home of the current incumbent - Robert Dorrien-Smith. It's an imposing building. He set up compulsory education and charged a penny a week to go to school and 2d if you did not. He also built a new church near where the hotel now is. The island is now an upmarket resort which is quite exclusive.

We saw a view of the Abbey. The East rockery contains many wonderful succulents such as agaves, a great big clump of *Agave celsii*, Furcraeas, Aeoniums and Restias. The agaves do really well. *Aenium cuneatum* is the main one that has naturalised itself on the island – the plants he had for sale were offspring of plants from Tresco. We saw a view from the self-accommodation. Agapanthus have also naturalised on the sand dunes. *Agave celsii* never seen quite like this anywhere on else – it had dark fine teeth on the edge of leaves and also leaves an imprint on the leaves. When he was there, the helicopter was the only way to get there. The flights had stopped for a while but they have been reinstated recently. It's a 20 minute flight on a Sikorsky – there is a ferry but it takes 3.5 hours on a good run, and it is quite rough since they are flat bottomed and the seas are quite shallow. The ground crew will meet you and can take you on a nice tour. The agapanthus have naturalised and Furcraea and yuccas have also escaped the garden. Watsonia are Tresco's own hybrids, and they are a bit like Crocosmia or Monbretia – it is a good hardy garden plant. Another South African plant is the silver tree *Leucadendron argenteum* – we saw the same plant 10 years apart. They grow on Table Mountain and the plants love it here.

At the front of the garden, *Gunnera manicata* (Chilean rhubarb) was growing in ditches. It has much bigger leaves than the plants on the mainland. We saw the old garden entrance. this is where the emus and ostriches lived – in Victorian times, they used to have a menagerie here. The new garden entrance emulates the Abbey arch. If you go in the shop, you can buy a few Tresco plants from the plant centre. A new bridge was built out of fallen tree storm of 1990. In 1987 they had a horrific frost which lasted 3 weeks and killed 95% of the plants. It also killed many of the plants sheltering the gardens. It is quite an achievement to have recreated things, and there is a book about this "*Tresco Abbey Garden: A Personal and Pictorial History*" by Mike Nelhams which contains some interesting stories

about these disasters. The lower gardens have ferns including exotic ferns such as *Blechnum tabulare*. There are also tree ferns (Dicksonias) here as well – they are exotic architectural plants. *Dicksonia antarctica* from Tasmania is the hardiest of them. *Astelia chathamica* is like Phormium (New Zealand flax). The Maoris call the unfurling frond the koru - a representation of the cycle of life, covering rebirth and regeneration. A much bigger and less hardy tree fern is *Cyathea medullaris* which has black stems and black stalks.

Ben is a tree officer and he like trees and you can see a lot of exotic trees. The Norfolk Island Pine *Araucaria heterophylla* is not hardy - it already has a star on top of the tree. It almost went extinct in the wild due to over harvesting for ships masts. An Australian version is the bunya bunya pine (*Araucaria bidwilli*). Next we saw the monkey puzzle tree - *Araucaria araucana* – it's name originated from a comment that it would puzzle a monkey to climb it. It should be called the Chile Pine really. In the Lower garden *Wachendorfia thyrsiflora* has pleated leaves and it has bright blood red roots but of course it's not easy to admire the roots of a plant. It can grow quite tall. As you get through the Lower garden, you get to the main avenues – north-south is the Lighthouse Walk and east-west is the Long Walk. At the far end of the Lighthouse walk are the Tresco Children - a statue of Robert Dorrien Smiths's children. There is a lovely edge display of spider plants – they can be treated as a herbaceous perennial. As you go up, you get to the Neptune steps and Father Neptune, a ship's figurehead who guards the gardens. It may look like it is hewn from rock but it is wooden and the stone appearance is achieved by blowing fine sand onto a coat of wet paint, protecting the original wood from the elements.

The Dasyliirions have long curvy stems, they are a relative of the agave, they have long flower spikes. The main feature trees in the gardens are the two large Phoenix palms – you would never see them this size anywhere else in the UK. These hedges are *Quercus ilex* (the holm oak) and it was the student gardener's rites of passage to climb to the top and trim them – they did this on ladders which health and safety would frown at these days.

There are friendly weeds on the island. The Giant Vipers Bugloss (*Echium pininana*) forms a big rosette and then in the 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> year it will form a flower spike of blue flowers some 15 feet tall and these will seed themselves. It will grow in anything. There are hundreds of seedlings after it seeds and Ben mentioned the plant does have irritating hairs on the leaves. *Echium wildpretii* is nice red one –

this photo also featured him when he was younger – he said it was taken in the same year that he first started coming to our branch. A geranium from Madeira (*Geranium maderense*) forms a big seed head in the 2<sup>nd</sup> year, the leaves are on long stalks and these act as spokes when the flower head develops. Another madeira plant - a fox glove which was not a hardy perennial but Thompson and Morgan had managed to create the “Illumination series” which was a cross between *Digitalis purpurea* and *Isoplexis scyphum*.

The next avenue is the Long Walk. On Tresco they have giant versions of plants we would consider as weeds. The giant dandelion - *Sonchus fruticosus* comes from the Canaries – it is essentially a giant dandelion, and isn't that hardy. They also have giant groundsel *Senecio grandifolius* a colleague at Wisley referred to it as a groundsel on steroids. It has huge leaves and clusters of hundreds of yellow flowers.

Another one you may be familiar with is the Angel's trumpet - *Brugmansia sanguinea* which a good patio plant for the summer. In garden centres the Daturas in garden centres are mainly hybrids and a completely different species (but is related). We also saw the succulent *Furcraea furcraea parmentieri* - they are monocarpic. want to make it an event to remember wait 40 years to flower - go up to the 70m metre height and produces 100 of greenish-yellow flowers followed by tiny bulbils which are ready to grow. Agaves get to epic proportions on Tresco. *A. salmiana* is large growing plant. It grows well and loves the granite. This is the area where the stone for the Abbey was quarried. This takes us into the mediterranean garden. They have done something completely different – and have a plant cast in bronze - created by Tom Leaper who created the agave fountain and we also saw the real plant, which was *Agave ferox* which is a variety of *Agave salmiana*. The agaves do extremely well, the soil is free draining and granite so holds a lot of heat. There were a couple of lovely sizable plants of *A. ferox*. David mentioned there are some good specimens in Falmouth and in Penzance and Ben agreed – and there were also Aeoniums everywhere in those towns. In the central point of the Mediterranean garden, Robert's wife Lucy Dorrien-Smith created the Shell house and the mural and mosaics here. The shells come from the island here and also from Barbados where they own other property. If you walk up through the med garden you come across succulent Pelargoniums and *Aloe arborescens*, Agaves and *Crassula coccinea* (Rochea) – the plants had different colours to them, perhaps some had received a bit more sun and become redder. There were Aeoniums growing up

the trunks of the palm trees and we would see these later. There was also the dark leaved *Aeonium 'Zwartkop'*, and there was also a sprawling crassula which had lovely flowers, which are filled with seeds afterwards.

We resumed the second half with some Aeoniums. A number of different plants have naturalised, none more so than *Aeonium cuneatum* which is a stemless plant but it does form runners on stems. It is cold tolerant but not frost hardy. When he was there, they had grown an entire bank of them as ground cover. Ben showed a picture of the same area but about 10 years later, where one of the big cypress trees had toppled over and taken many of the aeonium plants with them. They had managed to regenerate and were growing on the stumps and anywhere else they could get a hold on, including the stems of the palm trees.

Behind this area was something called the “Limpet midden” and this is where the limpet shells were dumped and this is now one of the best spots for the succulents to grow – it was a free draining soil. Another stemless one is *Aeonium tabuliforme*. *Aeonium nobile* is also stemless and it can form heads a foot or more across followed by red flowers. The plant behind is *Senecio serpens*. You don't really see it these days. *Aeonium arboreum* v. *holochrysum* has nice bronze markings on the leaves. It was growing on the side of a wall. This plant was covered in lichen and it's an indication that the air must be very clean. Another one that they grow on Tresco which is a bit more cold tolerant is *Aeonium balsamiferum* which forms an upright branching shrub like *A. arboreum*. It has sticky leaves, but they are not as sticky as *A. glutinosum*.

This takes us to the middle terrace. There are two main terraces – the middle terrace and the top terrace. We saw more agaves - *Agave salmiana* v. *ferox* - the plant that got him into Agaves. Tresco was a big influence on his interest into cacti and succulents. We could see a big Aeonium at the back and another view of the big *A. salmiana*. There are various other Aeoniums around – e.g. *A. haworthii* and the smaller shrubby pin wheel type Aeoniums. Also the bird of paradise quite happy growing outside. *Agave parryi* is one of the hardiest of all the Agaves – it does seem to be one of the most cold tolerant ones.

The cycad *Encephalartos* needs to be really dry and the soil must be free draining. There were some mesembs and we saw *Lampranthus spectabilis* - trailing mesembs – it can't really survive the winters in the main part of the UK, but it's everywhere in Cornwall and it does really well here in Tresco. A

real riot of flowers when the sun is out, the flowers do need the sun to open up. There were masses of Lampranthus in different colours scattered around. There are hardier mesembs you can try e.g. Delosperma and a lot of different hybrids but some are hardy others are not. He didn't think they last for very long. Lampranthus in the right spot can go on for years and years.

There are Euphorbias too. The shrubby *Euphorbia mellifera* (the honey spurge) has a lovely scent of honey. More Euphorbias were planted out at the back of the old Abbey, and they need it dry and need some heat. They were doing quite well there, the unique microclimate helps them. In the middle terrace was a huge clump of *Aloe striatula*. The next picture was taken in Ireland but if a plant grows there it can grow elsewhere too. It is one of the hardiest of the Aloes. It is now classified as an Aloiampelos. *Aloe variegata* is now *Gonialoe variegata*. He has several clumps of *Aloe striatula* in his garden and these were knocked back hard for him last winter but they have all come better than ever this year. *Aloe vera* is the one that is commercially important. Forever Aloe sell a lot of Aloe products. Tom mentioned Betamethasone and there are online comparisons of this versus Aloe products. Aloe does have healing properties if you have a burn or cut, and he has also been told if you bite your nails, rub some of the sap of *Aloe ferox* (bitter aloe) on your finger tips. It is a laxative as well!

Closely related to Aloes are the red-hot pokers (Kniphofia). In Australia they pronounce this as knip-hoffia and that might be the correct way to say it. There were a few bulbs as well, such as the South African pineapple lily *Eucomis autumnalis* and *Eucomis bicolor*. It has a really pungent smell, like the Stapeliads and Arums. All of the *Eucomis* are hardy except for the odd exception like *E. regia*. The colder it is in their habitat in the Drakensberg mountains, the hardier they are. The bird of paradise flower *Strelitzia reginae* is named after Queen Charlotte - wife of George III – who came from the of the house of Mecklenburg-Strelitz in Germany. Joseph Banks jumped on this plant when it was first introduced from South Africa. They were actually discovered and attributed to Francis Masson but no one has heard of him. Ben said we should have a talk about plant hunters one day – there is a very good book *The Plant Hunters* by Toby Musgrave. The reed leaved *Strelitzia juncea* has narrow cylindrical leaves. The climbing *Alstromeria Bomarea caldasii* is surprising hardy and is grown in Dorset. *Alstromeria* is an important cut flower but this is equally attractive, and it is slightly succulent. Ginger lilies are good for late interest in the gardens

and we saw *Hedychium densiflorum* and *Hedychium gardnerianum* which is nicely scented and flowers late. Cannas and Bananas are also popular. Other plants trailing over the rocks on the middle terrace included Australasian plants - *Prostanthera cuneata* is the alpine mint bush from Tasmania – it is really hardy. It has aromatic leaves scented of mint and it is related to the foxglove.

On the top terrace were different proteas. The King Protea *Protea cynaroides* on Tresco they have ideal conditions. It is difficult to grow them elsewhere and they need acid soil as well. The flowers are the size of a dinner plate and they can be retained for many years if they are dried. Next was the lovely neon-like *Protea susannae* with red tips to the leaves – it's a shame they are not hardy and easier to grow in a glass house. *Leucadendron salignus* is the willow leaved Leucodendron they are closely related to the other Leucodendrons and Proteas but this is a cone bearing plant which evolved before the flowering plants in the family and there are separate male and female plants. The foliage is yellow. They have been able to cross a number of Leucodendrons particularly in New Zealand and they have created *Leucadendron* "Safari Sunshine" and also *Leucadendron* "Safari Sunset". You also get the Leucospermums - pin cushions - the rocket pin cushion *Leucospermum reflexum* – the stems are 15 feet tall and they have smoky grey reflex leaves and fiery red orange flowers. They from the Cederberg mountains, and where this grows is the centre of production of the red bush tea industry.

Down the Cape peninsula you have the Pagoda Protea - *Mimetes cucullatus* – it almost went extinct completely, having a limited distribution from just one area called Silvermine – but they managed to conserve it. The big 3 of the Fynbos habitat are the Proteas, Ericas and Restias. The South African heaths are much showier and have larger flowers than our native plants. *Erica verticillata* is a plant which Kirtenbosch managed to preserve and it now grows in the middle of Kenilworth racecourse where there is a nature reserve in the centre. Pollination is important and sunbirds etc pollinate them. To complete the trio you have the cape reeds and we saw *Elegia capensis* growing in a rockery in an old pond. They can survive dry and wet conditions and are surprisingly frost hardy. If you like grasses, it is worth trying the cape reeds. They have an inhibitor in the seed coat, which is only triggered by exposure to smoke. And it has to be the smoke from burning fynbos plants, not any old smoke. You can buy kits to assist with this – buy a ethylene disc which is exposed to the smoke and immerse this in the water when germinating the seeds. David said the plant looks like Mare's Tail and Ben said these are

ancient plants which evolved a long time ago. Watch *The Earth* series on BBC iplayer by Chris Packham, it is a prehistoric plant. This is another interesting South African plant - reminds him of a kalanchoe which has similar leaves - this is *Melianthus major*, the honey bush. It is a relatively hardy garden plant with lovely architectural leaves.

There were also pelargoniums here. Ben mentioned there is big collection at Stourhead. The section for the tuberous Pelargoniums is section Hoarea which is named after Henry Hoare of Stourhead. Lachenalias - a few members of the South African bulb group are here. Exbury do a wonderful display of Lachenalias in the spring. Nerines are another South African bulb and there is a great collection of SA bulbs at Exbury. A South African allium called *Tulbaghia simmleri*, from a town called Tulbagh. The Australian proteas - *Banksia grandis* - one of the first plants Joseph Banks spotted when they sailed into Botany Bay. They have a wonderful compound leaf, almost like a fern. If you are into wood turning, the banksia nut is very woody and they are popular with the wood turners, you can buy banksia bottle stoppers and coasters etc. One that is slightly hardier that he has tried to grow is *Banksia integrifolia* - it has tubers and if the plant gets knocked back by fire, it can regenerate from the roots.

Up on the top terrace, looking out to St Marys, the heliport landing area is basically a rocky outcrop. *Metrosideros excelsa* is the New Zealand Christmas Tree which flowers in their summer (at our Christmas time). It is a member of the myrtle family and has bright red flowers and primordial aerial roots which hang down. Next were a few bromeliads - they do very well, particularly on the top terrace. *Fascicularia bicolor* is hardier than most and it has a metallic blue tubular flower. The leaves do go red when about to flower. *Ochagavia carnea* is a lovely pink one. On Tresco, they do very well with Puyas. They love the conditions and form great big thickets and produce head of lovely yellow flowers. It's

called the sheep eating plant in the Andes - the barbs on the leaves can trap sheep. which then can't escape. *Puya raimondii* is the Queen of the Andes and 10s of feet tall. Tresco is also popular for bird watching and a lot of people get excited when they see blackbirds with bright yellow heads - however, it's just normal blackbirds who have got into the Puya flowers.

There were Echiums in the background and we saw the giant himalayan honeysuckle *Lonicera hildebrandiana* which has huge long flowers and a lovely scent but is unfortunately not hardy. Ben mentioned the ship wrecks and in the gardens they have the Valhalla Museum which doubles up as the curators cottage. Within the Valhalla museum - you have all these ships figure heads which were collected from around the islands and placed in the museum in the condition they were found in. They were falling apart but in the 1960s the national maritime museum took over the collection and they restored them. He didn't have the names of most of them but a couple were called 'Chieftain' and 'Vanguard' - they were a big thing in the days of tall ships. Ladies were also important as ships figureheads. This was a wonderful collections and Ben ended with a slide showing a helicopter returning from the island, flying into the sunset. Adrian gave him a 5 star rating for his talk.

Vinay Shah

## Next Month's Meeting

Our first meeting of 2023 will be held on **January 2<sup>nd</sup>** and will feature Members' Mini Talks - Short Talks by Branch Members. We hope to have between 4 to 6 volunteers - please have a word with David if you have some slides you would like to present to us at that meeting.

## Forthcoming Events

Sat	9 <sup>th</sup>	Dec	Isle of Wight	Annual General Meeting followed by American Supper
Sat	9 <sup>th</sup>	Dec	Portsmouth	Annual General Meeting & Christmas Social
Tue	2 <sup>nd</sup>	Jan	Southampton	A Selection of Short Talks by Branch Members
Sat	13 <sup>th</sup>	Jan	Isle of Wight	Show and Tell.- Bring along a plant and tell us about it
Sat	20 <sup>th</sup>	Jan	Portsmouth	TBD

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

Facebook : <https://www.facebook.com/southamptonbcsc>