

THE JUDGES' COURSE – 4th – 6th September 2009

FRIDAY

This year Oxford Branch were represented by Steve Williams, attending for the first time, and John Watmough who can't get enough of it. Your correspondent's first concern on Friday afternoon was to arrive early enough to bag a strategic parking space from which to sell plants. His second was to sign in and be jovially rude to all the usual people before they could get their retaliation in first. The next job is to find one's room and work out how to get into it. This always baffles at least one person. The rooms at Moulton College are simple but comfortable; from the windows on one side one sometimes sees a wallaby hopping about. This is not a delusion, but it is always amusing to disbelieve any newcomer who claims to have seen a wallaby.

After a couple of hours selling, buying and discussing succulents in the car park, we rushed off to a more than adequate dinner. Because our numbers were a little low, we were glad to share the facilities with the delegates on a dog trainers' course. One of the younger cactus people confessed to amorous longings towards one or more of the dog trainers.

"You'd better be careful or you'll have a collar and lead on before you know it." He didn't seem to find that prospect at all discouraging.

The first lecture for the veterans was Graham Charles on *Gymnocalycium*s. Graham, as one might expect, gave an absolutely superlative talk on the genus, with live plants and habitat pictures. Some the plants that he brought were beautiful novelties that everyone drooled over. Meanwhile, the new bugs had been taken off by Mike Stansbie to learn about "Basic Principles of Judging."

The rest of the evening was summed up in the programme as, simply, "Bar". This rather oversimplifies. Over the two evenings Derek Tribble, Ian Robinson and Trevor Wray braved the standard barracking to entertain us all with what would have been three months' worth of really good talks at Branch level. We are most grateful for their casting of pearls.

SATURDAY

The first lecture for the rookies was about the arcane principles of "Trial Judging". Your correspondent has long forgotten what that means, but don't tell Mike. The cookies got a lecture from John Foster of Gloucester on "The Othonna Group". This was John's first lecture at Moulton and he delivered a beautifully crafted talk with live plants arranged before him according to their geographical affinity.

After tea both cookies and rookies combined for what, for Mike Stansbie, would be his third talk of the weekend. Furthermore, he managed to enthral even the most spine-hating succulentophile with a masterly exposition of the Large *Mammillarias*. He was able to give a cogently reasoned assessment of the show-worthiness of the large number of plants that he had brought with him. He provided valuable insights for all the actual and potential judges into what has traditionally been one of the mainstays of any cactus show.

"Lunch and Bar" turned out to be "Lunch and Car"; more exactly, clustering round Graham's car trying to buy his beautiful seedlings. Graham tried to thin out the crush by directing the banknote wavers to John Watmough's *Senecios* next door.

After lunch there was a business meeting hosted by John Betteley and Ian Thwaites. The point at issue was what to do about the projected Tenth Edition of the Guide to Shows. Essentially the problem is that DNA analysis has prompted massive taxonomic revision, with the effect that revisions to some of our show classes may be required. The meeting took the view (democratically, so no-one need complain) that the Shows Committee should delay the Tenth Edition until the dust has settled and the botanists are closer to a consensus.

This was followed by Ian Thwaites and Stirling Baker displaying the Ariocarpus and Astrophytum Groups. Judges and potential exhibitors were warned not to respect the traditional gnarled old Ariocarpus taking years to expire; the best Arios are green and vigorous. Also, we were told that any prejudice against hybrid or cultivar Astrophytums is misplaced; these are often slower and trickier than their ancestors.

The rest of the afternoon was taken up by Bob Potter's talk on Euphorbias for pots over 13cm diameter. As we have come to expect from Bob, it was insightful and beautifully illustrated, and he gave us the chance to study the plants that he described in his talk.

After dinner (or two or three dinners in some cases) and a frantic study of all the trays in the car park, we regrouped for Ray Stephenson on "Judging the less well-known Crassulaceae." We knew this was going to be good. After all, Ray has a bigger brain than the rest of us and the information in it is much better organised. As expected, even the cactus purists were exhilarated. We were shown plants that you hardly ever see, including plants that nobody except Ray can grow. The difficulties were explained from the point of view of a judge or an exhibitor. We were shown how six genera in the American Crassulaceae have all been interbred. This obviously has implications for the next Guide to Shows. He warned us to look out for a new wave of multi-generic hybrids that were due to hit the market. [They hit Wilkinsons Stores the Monday after.]

After a breathtaking master-class by the world's leading specialist we needed a few pints and the chance to insult Trevor and Ian, who gave us undeserved entertainment.

SUNDAY

In the car park before breakfast Derek Tribble put out trays of free samples (Tribble's Troubles) as he so often and so generously does. Then there was a last wistful look at the dog trainers over breakfast before we girded up our loins and crept up the big hill to the Judging Tests. Blue badges cactus, green badges succulents, and vice versa. Brain went numb. Mal Weobley acted as announcer, supervisor, invigilator and bouncer. Your correspondent felt his usual annual emotional turmoil – surprise, humiliation and despair.

The followed that part of the proceedings that your correspondent has never been able to cope with: the Inquest. "Did you spot the NAS?" No, how on earth could I have missed that? "I thought the cactus identification was easy this year." I even failed to identify a cactus that was in my own collection until last April. "Would people stop talking at the back!" "The Shows Committee have unanimously decided that this was first and this was second and this was third." Rubbish. They were arguing about it until two o'clock this morning.

Excellent lunch, though.

Goodbye, sweet friends. Thank you Mike and Mal and the rest of the Shows Committee. Both attendees from Oxford Branch agreed enthusiastically to come back next year.

Well, you would, wouldn't you? What we have actually experienced is a Convention given by some of the leading specialists in their subjects, with the opportunity to join them and our other friends in the dining hall, the bar, and the car park. In fact, the quality of talks at this year's course was perhaps the best there has ever been. You don't have to want to be a judge to experience that. If you like, you can regard the judging tests as a bit of harmless fun, and if you pass that's just icing on the cake.

This course should be recommended not only to people who are or who want to be show judges. Show secretaries will benefit hugely from the lectures and from the informal discussions that go on all the time. Keen exhibitors will learn more about the minds of show judges and will be better able to assess the merits of their own plants. Organisers of branch programmes will get to know potential speakers. And overall there are the interlocking friendships that are the bedrock of any thriving society.

You will be warmly welcomed. That's guaranteed!