

## OXFORD BRANCH AUCTIONS

There are two kinds of cactus auction. The first is the auction of the collection of a deceased member, and this required a swift response in order to catalogue the plants, segregate smaller plants into groups to form single lots, and price the remainder to dispose of on a sales table. An auctioneer has to be found at short notice, and sometimes suitable premises. The second is the planned auction, relying on contributors to come forward, but where there ought to be plenty of time to get everything organised.

However, some branches have tried and failed to organise such an auction. So, on the strength of having put on at least seven successful auctions, Oxford Branch respectfully invites readers to share our own experiences. The most important requirement at the outset is plenty of time. With time, it should be possible to recruit enough contributors to make it viable. It is also a good way of disposing of larger plants that may have been donated to the Branch.

Both kinds of auction require similar administration on the day, and Branches should not underestimate the number of people required. Here is a checklist of personnel:

1. Auctioneer. Must have a loud voice, a quick wit, and an ability to force the pace of proceedings. Bill Darbon (of Oxford) and David Kirkbright are top-notch eye-catchers and gavel bashers.
2. Stewards. These have to ensure that incoming plants are checked off, numbered, and placed in their correct positions on the viewing tables. They should elevate and display the exhibits during the auction. They must enforce the orderly collection of plants at the end *once they have been paid for*.
3. Secretaries. They will allocate numbered bidding cards to visitors and record the numbers against names on a list. They will record the names of the successful bidders and the amount of their bids. They will aggregate these amounts at the end and collect the money .
4. Sales Table personnel.
5. Persons to manage the catering, which is always an important service to those attending and which ought to be profitable as well.

If you add in the tasks of setting out the furniture beforehand and clearing up afterwards, it is clear that ten or eleven keen and active persons are needed: 1 auctioneer, 3 stewards, 2 secretaries, 2 sales table personnel, and 3 in the kitchen.

Afterwards a treasurer needs to sort out all the money, prepare a set of accounts for the event, distribute the allotted take to the contributors, and bank the Branch's proceeds. In the interests of goodwill it is vital that the distribution should be undertaken without delay.

But it is the activities before the auction that will make it or break it. It is no exaggeration that work should start six months in advance. The hall has to be booked. It has to have adequate space, a large number of tables (the cost of hiring tables is usually prohibitive), a large car park, and acceptable kitchen accommodation.

What time of the year is best? Our preference is April, when the sap starts to rise in the would-be growers (and the plants). This will have given potential contributors the whole winter to decide which plants they can do without, and potential buyers the chance to note the spaces on their

shelves that just have to be filled. In our own experience holding an auction every year is too frequent, and not enough entries are produced. So we have stuck to a two-year cycle.

Working to an April time-scale, it is advisable for the Organising Genius to have a preliminary Catalogue available by the end of December. Inexperienced organisers may think this rather early. But the trouble is a Catch-22: contributors are slow to come forward unless they are assured that the auction will be a big event, but it will not be a big event unless plenty of contributors come forward. So the organiser has to twist arms, make a nuisance of himself, and supply as many entries as he can out of his own collection, so as to make up a preliminary Catalogue that will show that the Branch has serious intentions. There will then be a big rush in early April, and the Auctioneer, who has been told that there will be a comfortable 70 or 80 lots, discovers at the last minute that he is expected to dispose of 120 - plus what so-and-so will bring on the day if he is still in the country.

Advertising is crucial. It is not enough to design a pretty web-page and hope, like spiders, to catch flies. All relevant information needs to be electronically available, of course. But it is the personal touch that draws in contributors. Letters to previous or potential contributors are recommended, plus e-Mails and phone calls. These should be supplemented by circulars to other Branches, and leaflets to be distributed at conventions, coach trips and other succulent events.

Oxford Branch insist on taking 20% of the proceeds, which puts us in the same league as Christies and Sothebys. But our contention is that a smaller figure will not bring in the revenue that we need to pay the running costs of the Branch, with massively increased petrol and postal prices. We also suggest, as a rough guide, that for a plant or group of plants to be worth auctioning, it ought to be worth at least £5. Otherwise it ought to be on the Sales Table. But there is no guarantee in an auction that expected price will be reached. We do accept reserve prices to protect the owners of valuable specimens, but only if the organiser has been instructed beforehand.

What is needed is contributors. Entries should be submitted to the Organiser in this form:

<i>Calymmanthium substerile</i>	6" pot	Three stems 10" high	Grown from seed 1987
Six different <i>Lithops</i>	9cm pots	Nice clean plants	

*John Watmough.*