

(A Swan song)

Well it's October and mornings are now quite chilly with lots of dew around and the nights will be getting darker, so time in the greenhouse will be limited. Fortunately today 12th was a lovely morning, so I spent most of it sorting out spaces for the plants from outside and have got most of them in. I still have a few more to do but hopefully tomorrow or the next few days will be the same weather. My Conophytums are really flowering well now with purple, white and yellow splashes of colour and the night flowering ones leaving that strange scent in the air. A few of the Ariocarpus have also burst into life so there are still some things happening when you look around. Off to the Haworthia weekend on the 16th and collecting Cok Grootsholten (from Luton) whom some of you will know from the continental trips which visit his nursery in Holland, so we will have plenty to chat about.

It's been a busy year with one thing and another and as I recollect a good one for the Branch as a whole with highlights being our display at Blenheim and the wonderful Branch Show at Grove. I hope that all of you that have read my ramblings have liked them and those of you that have been able to attend our meetings and events have enjoyed the experience.

I do not feel that I have given all the plants the time and attention that they deserved, but they always reward what ever you do by doing their thing in glorious colour throughout the year.

Bill Darbon



Bill's Blog

My Greenhouse 2015

8th September

Well, September is upon us and the weather has turned distinctly cooler and it's still wet; do we think about drying off some of the plants yet? Let's hope we get a bit of an Indian summer and we can leave it bit. As I am away most of September - Judges Course, ELK and my trip to the US, I have already watered the cacti with systemic ready for the winter; hopefully if the weather is OK I will repeat the dose in the succulent house before I go away. As I said previously I have started to bring in the plants from outside to dry them off and am trying to fit them into spaces that I have not got.

There are still some late flowers around - my large *Notocactus warasii* (yes I still call it *Notocactus*) is in flower again and some of the *Parodias* as well. No sign of any flowers yet on the *Ariocarpus*, perhaps it's not been warm enough. although most of them are on the top shelf and so should get enough warmth to encourage them to flower. Some of the *Mesemb's* are beginning to show signs of new growth and some early flowers in *Lithops* and *Pleiospilos*. A *Dioscorea* (elephants foot) that I got from Bill Maddams sale has suddenly sprouted, I have been surprised just

how quick the shoots grow and get tangled round other plants nearby so I am now trying to restrict it on a frame.

Some of our branch members will now doubt meet up with some other friends over some Belgium beer in the not too distant future and may be tempted to a few purchases. I am really looking forward to my trip to New Mexico and meeting up with Woody and Kathy again. They have planned some excursions for me whilst I am there, so I have treated myself to a new camera for the trip. Hopefully I will come back with some nice pictures to show off if all goes well.



Notocactus warasii

Bill's Blog

My Greenhouse 2015

9th August

I am conscious that in my recent ramblings that I have not really said much about the Greenhouse and its contents. It seems to have been a strange year for the plants and perhaps with all my gadding about to various Cacti related events I perhaps have not shown the plants the attention they deserve. Obviously the ones that I dusted off and tidied up to exhibit at the show received the extra attention of new top dressing and a bit of spit and polish to the pots.



Aloe parvula

Having now recovered from what was a stupendous show, I am looking around at the Succulents in particular they still do not all appear to have really woken up, maybe due to lack of water or food so they have all been duly attended to with a tonic (pick me up) so let's hope they show some improvement, the Conophytums obviously are still asleep and would not look their best at the moment anyway. I sometime feel like a nurse wandering around checking on the patients to see that they have all had their medication etc., fortunately apart from one disaster (*Euphorbia unispina*) that despite having major surgery the patient failed to re root and died (I may find a new one at ELK who knows)

Anyway enough doom and gloom, it seems a little early but I have begun to tidy up under the benches to make room for the plants that have been outside on summer vacation. Yet another Agave (*filifera*) this time has decided to flower let's hope I get seed or plantlets this time. I still have quite a lot of material to re-pot or tidy up for future sales ELK beckons again, I am going to try and be a lot more selective there this year, but you always get tempted by something, but first on the horizon is the Judge's Course so more plants to sort out for the Judging tests, at least this make me look at them more closely.

It was a passing remark by Mary at The Committee meeting the other night that made me look back in the records of time as to just how long we (the Branch, not just me) had been doing Shows at The Langdale Hall at Witney and yes it was **1996**. Now for David that may mean me scripting a special “all our yesterdays” article for Oxotica. Sadly a lot of water has flown under the bridge since then and many of the names from the past are now no long with us, including sadly now the Hall. As a matter of fact I had a call from Witney Town Hall office the other day about a the provisional booking I had made. Although the builders have done a good job on the refurbishment of The Corn Exchange and the facilities are nice new and shiny and we could probably get the show in the new hall, for us the issue of nearby parking and unloading is **sadly not feasible**

But we must be positive and look forward to a successful event at our NEW Venue. So hopefully when you are reading this **YOU** will have as I said in my previous episode “*Dusted off the cobwebs*” and given me your entry for **the show**. David and Jean being our local liaison contingent have been sticking posters everywhere they can think of so hopefully the folk of Grove will come and see “The Strange Cactus on Show”.

Now I must decide what I will be putting in - its always a balancing act for me. There are plants that I want to show, but as the Show Secretary I like to keep a balance of entries in each class and so may have to raid the greenhouse to fill up the classes, although if rumour has it folk have said they are coming from far and wide and hopefully with the draw of a Specialist Society (Haworthias) they will, but we will see what transpires. We hopefully will be able to post the results of a success on the Oxford Branch web page. **SO HERE'S TO THE SHOW !!!**



Well folks I feel well and truly exhausted after yet another Auction has been completed. It was good to have the support of my fellow branch members. David did a great job with the web page posting Martin's pictures, with help from Gillian, and the list of plants that he had compiled. Thanks to all we did Rene proud. I think all the 40 plus attendees all went away happy with their plants and YES yours truly did find something to buy, but I am not sure where they will go. Some serious rationalisation will be needed. I may even think about swapping the plants around, but other important things are on the horizon.

When you are reading this episode we will be or have been heavily involved in a display at Blenheim Palace Flower Show between 19th and 21st June. Martin has become the branch carpenter, John the gatherer of plants from all corners and myself the ouzelum bird. Seriously. my own plants have probably thought their owner had deserted them, but looking around for plants to put on the display they are getting the attention they deserve, so best foot forward and brush them up to look their best.

We did ourselves proud with winning a Silver Gilt Award. Next is the Branch sales table at Portishead Cactus Mart on 28th then with a bit of luck we will all be looking around at our plants to hopefully see what we can show at the Branch Show in August.

Well, the Show Season had started so it was time to really brush up some of the plants to take along to our friends' show at Great Kingshill (High Wycombe Branch). Our Branch was well represented, as John also came along and he even ended up on the sales table, *I think that he has withdrawal symptoms if he is not selling plant s.* We even came away with a few prizes.

I seem to have been involved with lots of plant sorting recently, what with my own collection and helping to arrange Bill Maddams's plants for the auction on 24th. I was even tempted to visit Birmingham on 17th together with Gareth and managed to acquire some more plants and even got some for another Oxford Member. I really must try to keep my hand down, but it's difficult when you see a good plant potentially going for

silly money; however, you can't buy everything. The Greenhouse has not got expanding sides and I have not got a bottomless piggy bank, so I may eventually decide to sell some on or pass them to Gareth; we will see.

The Cacti are really still doing their thing with lots of early flowers on Echinocereus, Mammillarias of course, and some of the small plants like Pelecyphora and Thelocephala. Although some of the Crassula's still have a few flowers the Succulent house is not much of a floral display, but its time will come.



Mammillaria spinosissima



Echinocereus pulchellus v sharpii

Bill's Blog

My Greenhouse 2015

10 May

I am glad that I decided to open the collection as it gave me a good chance to smarten up the greenhouses, and I was fortunate that Gareth came down to help me tidy up on Friday and Saturday. Although plants could be seen on the top of the staging easily, I did not realise what I had packed away underneath. He was like a whirling dervish once we started sorting out and I was struggling to keep up with him. We moved the Agaves and a few other plants outside (as is normal for the summer) which gave plenty of room to re-sort the rest of the sales and propagation material. Of course I put some of the sales plants out to hopefully to tempt the visitors; I was even left with some space on the top of the staging.

We were blessed with a fine day although a little overcast. It was nice to welcome visitors from our neighbours from High Wycombe and Reading, but where were the Oxford Members?? I had received apologies from some and others I knew were away or unavailable. I am afraid that if you did not come you missed out on a delicious cake that Jules had baked especially - *your loss*. Martin very kindly took some pictures which will hopefully be featured on the Branch events programme in due course. A good day with friends, talking about our favourite hobby.



Mammillaria Bombycina

Bill's Blog

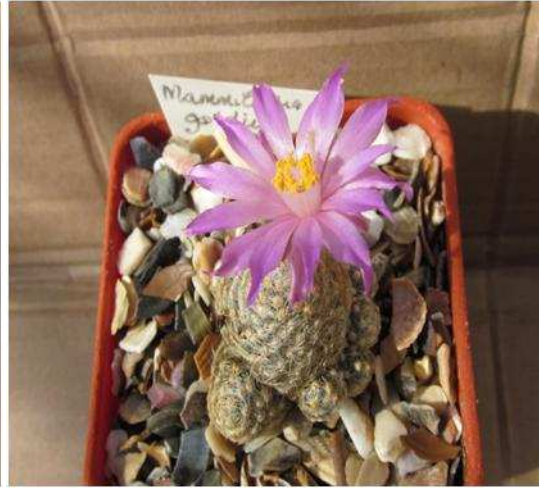
My Greenhouse 2015

26 April

Well what wonderful weather we have at the moment. I think it crept up on us and has taken some of us by surprise. I am glad that I watered the other weekend at least the plants appear to have benefited as I have some nice surprises - Pelecyphora rubispina, and Mammillaria goldi in bloom; also I have a lovely display of Normanbokea (Turbinicarpus) valdeziana seedlings doing their thing.



Pelecyphora rubispina



Mammillaria goldi



Turbinicarpus valdeziana (seedlings)

Lets hope some more of the other early buds come out soon. Sadly the succulents are not really keeping pace, but I suppose that some don't really get going yet. A couple of the Echeveria have flower stalks but are not really fully out yet. I have just taken some branches off Aeonium Schwarzkopf ready to grow on for sales and hope to do the same with Aeonium ballerina.

I am planning to water with some systemic in the evenings just in case any little 'Pests' are lurking were I can't see them.

I joined three other intrepid explorers on Saturday to venture to the Lincolnshire Fens to the Spalding Mart. There was a fine array of varying plants to drool over and I was tempted to add a few to the collection a

nice 5 headed *Hoodia gordonii*, *Sarcocaulon (Monsonia) inerme*, an *Astrophytum myrostigma* cross and a *Crassula ausensis*.to name a few. I could have been tempted to lots more as Bryan Goodey had many nice plants in flower. My colleagues also came away with a few extra goodies, and a good day was had by all.

Bill's Blog

My Greenhouse 2015

6 April

Let us hope that all those late frosts have now gone and with the extra hour in the evenings we can now get down to some serious sorting out of the collections. I also have to erect a new shed as the old one has nearly collapsed, but to do so I have to empty the other one. No doubt I will find no end of pots of all sizes. The whole collection used to be in clay and whether it was my Father's influence or just me "you never thrown anything out just in case it comes in useful", but I will have to be very ruthless so there may be some spare pots on offer once I have finished sorting out.

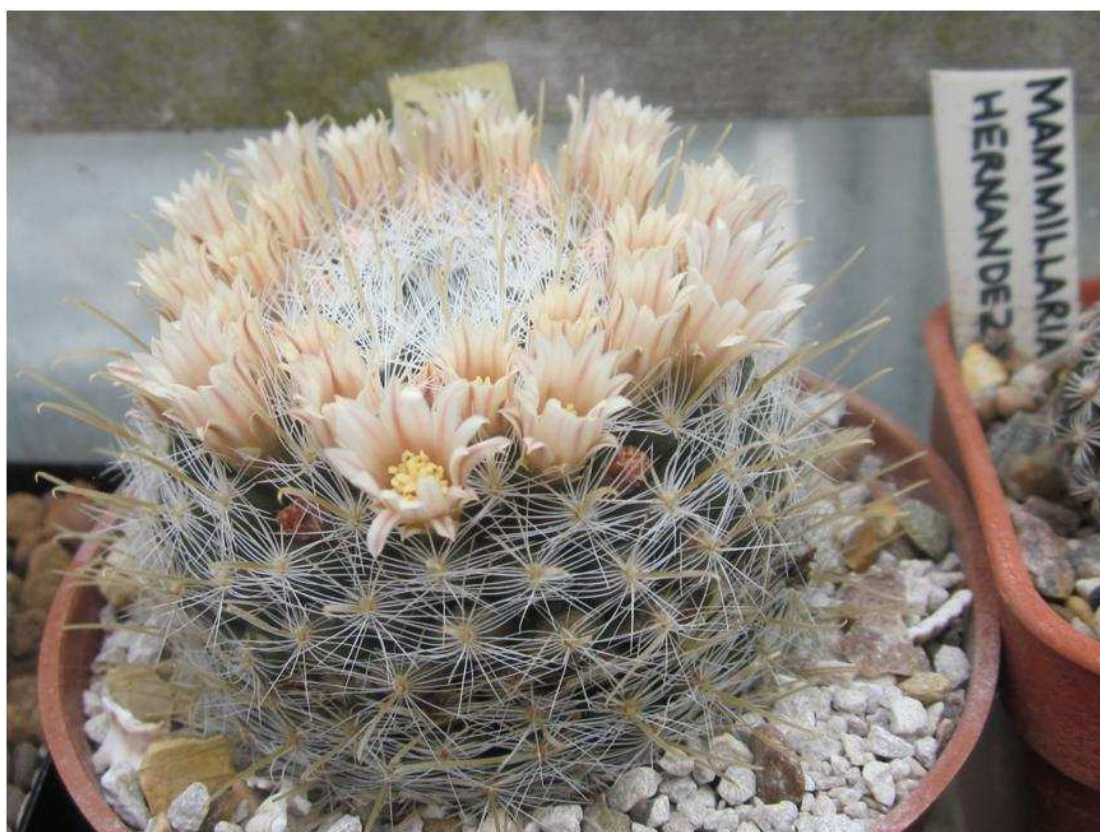
Easter Monday saw another beautiful day so I was tempted out into the sun to water the collection again. Things are really beginning to move now with buds and some flowers, mainly the cacti *Mammillaria lasicantha*, *neohumbertii* and *sanchez meherada* as shown below.



I hope that some more plants will be encouraged by the fine and bright days ahead. Although the succulents are also beginning to move there is nothing really outstanding in the way of a floral tribute, so hopefully spring is really here, and we can look forward to a good growing season.

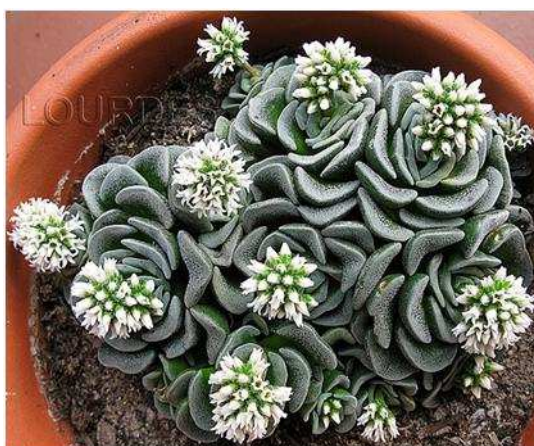
Two new acquisitions from The Zone 9 Convention, a nice double-headed *Euphorbia bupleurifolia* and a *Dorstenia* species, were added to the collection.

Well, what with the eclipse, the equinox and British Summer Time beckoning it was so nice today, 23rd March, that I took the decision to water the whole collection, I suspect that some of you did likewise. It was no surprise quite how dry the plants were, even those that I had been watering throughout the winter. So the water butt is now somewhat reduced; I did not think that it was time for the hose pipe quite yet as I like to get some water into the plants before I give systemic or food. There are a few plants that are showing off with flowers - an *Aloe dumetorum* and *Mammillaria pennispinosa* (below):



hopefully more will burst into life now they have had their first drink. The frosts over the last two nights have just reminded us that we can not turn off the heaters just yet lets hope that nothing is affected by their recent awakening.

Now the weather is beginning to get milder one is tempted out of hibernation on sunny days to start looking in more details at things that need to be done. Some of the smaller succulents in the hot end have dried up, particularly a *Dorstenia crispa* var. *lancifolia* and a *Pterodiscus*. But I was pleased that some of the *Euphorbias* are beginning to show signs of new growth. I have even managed to keep arms on *E. decidua* and leaves on *E. capsaintemariensis*. I was also pleased to see some *Crassulas* are in bloom, especially *Justus corderoy* (an old favourite of Oxford Branch) and species *celia* shown below, so not all doom and gloom.



I have removed all the old dead leaves off the *Aeomiums* and *Echeverias* to prevent that deadly Cotton Wool Monster from invading and I am considering taking some early cuttings for propagation, but perhaps it is still a little early. Some of the cacti look as though they need a little water to stop them shrivelling; *Gymnocactus horstii* is one that is prone to this in my experience. In fact if the weather continues this warm spell I may consider an early watering for most of the plants. Lets wait and see.

I had a nice surprise on Friday 29th January when some *Haworthias* that I had ordered from South Africa arrived. They had not been dispatched until recently due to the ongoing postal strike, so they have been potted up and moved to the warmer end of the big house to encourage the roots and to get established. If no one has looked I can recommend the Kambroo plants web page for good quality plants www.kambroo.com

This encouraged me to look at some of the other small plants that I had purchased in 2014 to see how they were doing. Some had unfortunately dried up over winter, but others were beginning to get well established, I realized that I now have over 80 different Haworthias growing on (long way to go to catch the likes of Stirling) but from little acorns etc. Although I am looking around carefully, the cacti do not appear to be moving much at the moment. *Mammillaria hernandezii* has buds which hopefully will come to fruition.



Mammillaria hernandezii

31st January

My Greenhouse 2015 - A calendar year

I thought that as the new Chair of the Branch I might supply David with some text for either the web page or Oxotica or both. This will be an ongoing commentary of what's happening in my greenhouse throughout the year. The collection is based in three greenhouses: the Cacti are mainly in 12 x 8 (Crittall) the Succulents are in a 14 x 8 (Robinson) with a 4 x 8 hot end, and there is overflow into Gareth's old 6 x 4.

After Christmas and the New Year we are all looking at the weather to see if we need to turn up the heaters and planning what we need to do. My plants really need a good sort out especially with the Open Day in May, but frosty days are not really the best for re-potting so January will be just for keeping those plants that need a little water going. When you look around there are some plants still in growth: some Mesembs and the Dudleya's and the occasional flower (*Eriosyce nigrihorrida* with its red/pink flowers and *Othonna triplenevia* flowering for the first time with its yellow petals).

Sadly there are always plants that do not survive and I have lost a number of plants in particular *Neochilena malleolata* (below) to the dreaded red rot. I enjoyed it when it was at its best, reminiscence of past glory.



(photograph at Witney Show courtesy of Gillian)

A recent disaster was that I found one of the greenhouse heaters had failed and because of its age (over 20 years old) the spare part - a new thermo coupling - is no longer available, so I have had to improvise with a mobile butane heater until I can find a suitable replacement.