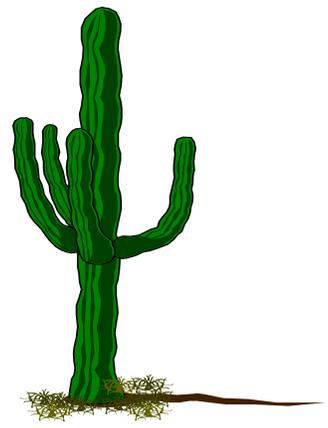


Oxotica

The Newsletter of the Oxford Branch of the
British Cactus and Succulent Society

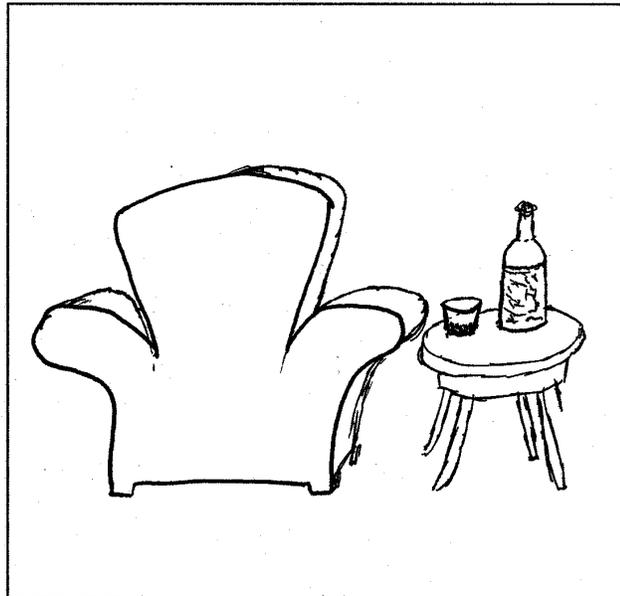
December 1998

Volume 3, Number 2



From the Chair.....

Another year in the story of the Oxford Branch draws to its close with the annual ritual of the AGM. For those who did not make it to the meeting, the Chairman's Report is reproduced below. John Watmough has been looking back into the mists of time, to glean some information on the early days of the Oxford Branch. It seems that we have now been in existence for forty years - a milestone we aim to commemorate with a Convention in July. (Worryingly, this means that I have been going to the Oxford branch for half of its existence.....)



Chairman's Report, 1998.

1998 has probably been the worst year for some considerable time for growing cacti and other succulents. Following an unusually warm winter we had a dull and rather wet summer, commonly resulting in poorer than average growth and flowering. In contrast, however, I am pleased to report that this has been a successful year for the Oxford Branch, reflected in a satisfyingly high level of activity within the Branch. We have had a full programme of eleven speakers for our monthly meetings in the John Bunyan Baptist Church Hall. As usual the standard of talks has been excellent and has contained material to interest both the

newer grower and the experienced cactophile. Two features of these monthly meetings deserve comment - firstly our environment, which has been transformed into a small art exhibition. We now have what must be the most aesthetic venue of any BCSS branch! Whilst this has the benefit of providing visual stimulation during the Chairman's preamble to each meeting, the disadvantage is that extra diligence is now required to clear up any traces of spilled potting compost from the floor before we leave! The second is the excellent support we have had for the table show, extended to five classes this year. This has attracted entries that would not look out of place in many branch or zone shows, and invariably provides our

speaker with an onerous task during the customary tea break!

During the course of this year the Oxford Branch has actively participated in the organisation of three shows. The first, in early May, was the Southern Area Show run jointly with Birmingham Branch. This was held in a marquee at the spring Malvern Show. Although organised at rather short notice, and attracting a disappointing entry (for a Southern Area Show), this proved an excellent shop window for the Society to reach a wider public. Towards the end of May we supported the successful Zone 8 show, which was held in Birmingham, and our own Branch Show was held in Witney on August Bank Holiday Sunday. Both presented excellent displays of plants (or perhaps displays of excellent plants!) and were to be adjudged successful.

Other Branch events have included publicity displays at the Burford Garden Centre. There have been Open Days laid on by 2 of our members, and several Branch members visited the Spalding Cactus Mart and went on to Southfields Nurseries as a day trip. Two issues of our Newsletter, now named 'Oxotica', have been produced. Thirteen branch members attended the BCSS National Convention in Reading; we believe we were the most represented branch at that event, and three members of the Branch attended the Judges' course in September. The Oxford Branch hosted the Society's Executive meeting in October at Didcot, and it is a great pleasure to report that our Secretary, Cathy Darbon, was elected to the Finance and General Purposes Committee of the Society.

At a more mundane, but nevertheless essential, level, I am pleased to report that the Branch will close this year on a more comfortable financial footing than we

opened it, for which grateful thanks are due to the Treasurer. This improvement has been occasioned by the successful turnround of many of our activities over the year from making a small loss to making a modest profit. A reorganisation of the library has taken place, with the sale of some surplus books. In part this has been necessitated by the metamorphosis of our venue, where the increase in elegance has been at the expense of some small loss of utility! During Committee meetings this year your Committee has taken the opportunity to conduct a wide-ranging review of Branch activities. No revolutionary changes are anticipated, but we hope that we can enhance your future enjoyment of our meetings and other activities.

Finally I must thank all those who have contributed to the success of Branch this year, especially those who have helped with the catering at both the monthly meetings and at our show. I would also like to thank the contributors of raffle prizes for your donations throughout the year.

It has been a particular pleasure to see a number of new faces at our meetings and events this year - we hope you have enjoyed what we have to offer.

Ray Pearce.

PLEASE NOTE: in addition to the monthly meetings detailed in this newsletter, other Branch events - conventions, members' Open Days, "cactus mart" or other visits, special sales etc. - might be arranged before the next newsletter is distributed; please contact any member of the committee to hear of these - **or just come along to the monthly meetings!**

SPEAKERS, January - June 1999

28 January

John Watmough
Lophophoras

Our former Chairman and now show secretary will start the year with his entertaining talk about Peyote Cactus. I am sure we will all enjoy John's style of presentation on this fascinating group of plants. Some of you will have enjoyed his articles in the newsletter and hopefully that will have wetted your appetite for more.

25 February

Dr Gill Evison
(To be announced)

We welcome Gillian, another home-grown talent, to our February meeting. Due to work commitments she cannot attend meetings regularly, but this is your opportunity to hear what I am sure will be an exceedingly instructive talk. Gillian has won many prizes with her plants at shows at both Branch and National level.

25 March

John Ede
A year in a country greenhouse

John may not be well known to many of you but is a very entertaining speaker from the Dorking area, where he is always in demand. He has very good all round knowledge of cacti and succulents, and is a qualified judge. I am sure this will be a very good evening.

22 April

Mini Judges Course

This will be your chance to see inside the show judge's mind, and an opportunity to find that explanation to the niggling question that you have always wanted to

know - "just how do they reach those decisions?!!!"

27 May

Alasdair Glen
Neopteris and all that

Another first for this branch and an evening for the enthusiast not to miss. Alasdair is a widely travelled speaker, originally from Scotland but now retired and living in Cheshire. This topic is one of his own specialities so I am sure we are in for an exceedingly instructive and entertaining night.

24 June

Branch Plant Forum

This evening has been arranged to answer some or all of your questions about the growing of plants, and provides an opportunity to exchange views and swap ideas. Bring along your problems to our panel. We will even try to name any plants minus a label that you may have. If you intend to do this, and the plant flowers before the event, please take note of the flower colour and shape.

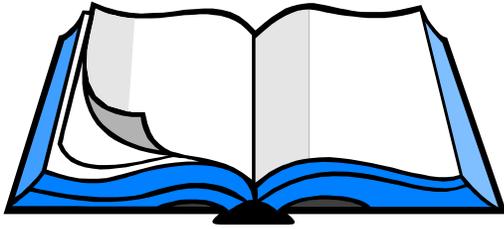
Cathy Darbon

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The Branch meets at 7.30 p.m. on the 4th Thursday of each month (except December) at the John Bunyon Baptist Chapel, Cromwell Road, Cowley, Oxford.

President	Alan Illott	01865 730924
Chairman:	Ray Pearce	01865 766891
Vice-Chairman:	Mary Stone	01865 774268
Secretary:	Cathy Darbon	01993 881926
Treasurer:	Steve Williams	01367 718944
Show Secretary:	Bill Darbon	01993 881926
Committee:	Brian Conway	01865 765800
	David Greenaway	01235 762761
	John Warwick	01235 848399
	John Watmough	01865 772709

Editor of **Oxotica:** David Greenaway



OLD MORTAR RUBBLE

The earliest of Alan Illott's Oxford Branch newsletters is headed "Vol. 8 No. 3 , March 1965". Reckoning backwards, we may guess that Vol. 1 No. 1 was issued in January 1958, proving that our Branch is at least forty years old. This first extant newsletter asked members to cough up their £1 annual subscription. Meetings were held in Oriel college in those days; the last meeting held there was in March 1971. A member complained that his branch newsletter did not arrive on the first day of every month. Young Dr Mortimer was elected national Chairman in April, and a Zone system was set up to take effect in 1966. Members were urged not to harass Mr Bulmer, who was 83 years old and trying to send out all the seed orders by himself. Members complained about the Journal being late, considering that the sudden death of Mr Gledhill, the editor, was insufficient excuse.

The Society would institute a judge's course in 1966 at Brooksby Hall, Melton Mowbray. Amazingly, this is where the 1999 course will take place. In June, still in 1965, young Mr Billing won most of the trophies in the annual table show. It is wonderful to have John Billing back in the branch today. Incidentally, it was he who sold Tom Jenkins Tom's first *Astrophytum*. In August there is a request for a volunteer to collect young Mr Rowley from Reading. His talk, on the "Costa Brava", was obviously a highlight, because he is described in November as the "one and

only" even then, and attracted members from Abingdon and Northampton branches.

Mrs Dudley, still warmly remembered by older members, was branch secretary in those days. She booked the great Hermann Jacobsen for the May 1966 meeting. The late John Mullard was elected branch chairman at the January 1966 AGM, which was "as usual not well attended". We note that Mr Billing was on the committee. There were only two classes in the plant of the month competition; previous winners used to be handicapped by having points deducted. There was a library fine of one shilling a month (when beer was one shilling and tenpence a pint!)

Young Bill Keen addressed our April 1966 meeting and obviously was a great success, being commended for his expert knowledge on *Notocacti*. Members were asked not to hassle Mr Bulmer, who was now "a very old man". Dr Jacobsen's visit was deemed a great success, but we are not told what he spoke about.

Perhaps we can close this snapshot of the old days with a look at the Branch membership list, published in the July 1966 newsletter. Vic Bateman is there - he it was that got us the use of the present John Bunyon Church Hall, where, indeed, we sometimes still meet him. John Billing, much respected. John and Jo Mullard, of course, with Mrs Dudley. Young Mr Illott who was then a member of Abingdon Branch, appears for the first time in August 1966 (with his name spelt wrong) for being in the cards in the table show.

If any one has any information about the earlier history of our branch I should be delighted to hear from them.

John Watmough

OXFORD BRANCH SHOW 1998

Once again we gathered at the Langdale Hall, Witney, on Sunday 30 August 1998, for the annual branch show. It was very nice to see members from our Zone branches of Birmingham, High Wycombe and Swindon supporting us with their entries, not to mention members from Harrow and North Wilts. I do wish we could get more of the Oxford members interested in coming along: after all, this is our main money-making event which allows us to provide the range and diversity of speakers at the branch meetings, and to distribute this newsletter.

Anyway, enough of that. There was a good range of plants on the sales tables of Brookside and Plantlife; both these nurseries come from the same area and we may even consider the next branch outing to that part of the world. **Interested?** - then give one of the committee members a nudge.

The main award of the Ron Ginns medal was won by Len Evans from Birmingham, but he was chased all the way by Bill and Cathy Darbon and John Watmough.

Best cactus - *Mammillaria geminispina* v *nobilis*, exhibited by Eric Robertson of High Wycombe.

Best succulent - *Tavaresia grandiflora*, exhibited by Len Evans of Birmingham.

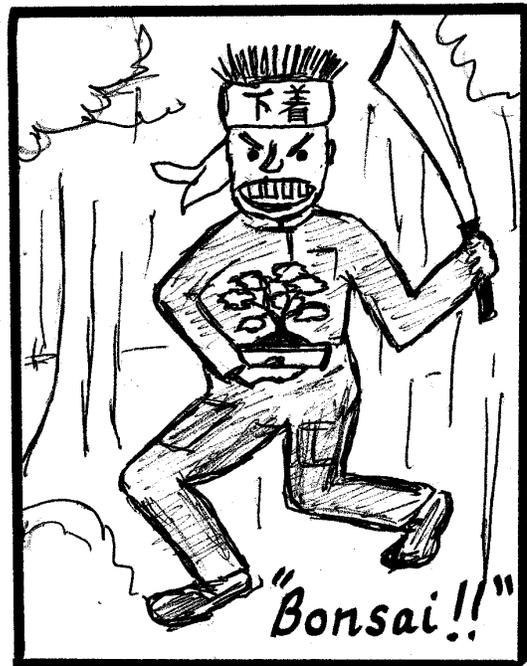
There were over 400 entries on display that filled the tables, and once again the thematic class was a success. The judge, John Betteley of Lincoln, made the comment that he had found no NAS entries, which was a credit to our stewards.

The ladies of the kitchen did us proud with a supply of food and drink all day, for

which those who attended were very grateful.

A successful day, but please do try and come next year. I am sure you would enjoy it and we on the committee would be pleased to meet you face to face.

Bill Darbon



John Watmough

ITEMS FOR SALE

BACO Aluminium Greenhouse 8ft x 8ft complete with aluminium staging and shelving in good condition (purchaser dismantles), £150 o.n.o.

JEMP propagator 4ft x 2ft, good condition, £20.

BEF (Green) Square Pots, second-hand but in good condition: 2 ¾ x 3"; 3 ½ x 3 ½"; 3 ½ x 5"; 4 x 4"; 4 ½ x 4" and 5 x 5".
2p - 3p - 4p - 5p each.

Contact W Darbon 01993 881926 for further details.

GETTING MORE FROM YOUR HOBBY: I. SEEDRAISING.

Growing cacti and other succulents from seed is one of the most satisfying (and economical!) ways of extending your collection, although many growers have never tried it. It can also be one of the best ways of obtaining those hard-to-find plants on one's wants list that none of the major nurseries seem to sell. In this short article I aim to outline some of the essentials for successful seedraising, based on my own experience. Whilst aimed at the novice, I hope these comments may also be of some interest to the more experienced grower. They are in no way a definitive guide; there is no single way to success, and what works well for one person may be less successful in a different cultivation environment. Direct experience and experimentation will allow you to fine-tune your approach to suit your particular circumstances.

Sources of seed.

There are four main sources of succulent plant seed available to most of us: seed from our own plants; seed from our friends' plants; the Society's seed distribution; and seed from commercial sources. The first of these will not expand the diversity of your collection, although it is an ideal source of seed for experimentation and can be an insurance against the future demise of the parent plant. Much the same applies to the second, but this can provide new species also. From both these sources be very meticulous about labelling the resultant plants; if there is any doubt as to the parentage of the seed indicate the probable hybrid origin of the plants. Any mislabelling as the female parent of plants of doubtful origin does the hobby a great disservice, especially with the increasing difficulty in obtaining verifiable plants of habitat origin. In this regard, seed set

spontaneously on plants other than those self-fertile plants that regularly set seed such as *Frailea*, *Setiechinopsis mirabilis*, some *Rebutia*, must be regarded as particularly suspect, especially if it is the only representative of that taxon in your greenhouse. Commonly, controlled pollination using a fine brush to transfer pollen between flowering plants of the same species is required to ensure that seed is true. Ideally the plants should be isolated from potential hybridising species and cross-pollinating insects during flowering.

Seed from the two latter sources should be 'correct', but sadly is not always found to be so. However, other than being aware of the potential problems, there is little that one can do. The Society provides a limited range of seeds at a very reasonable price, available with minimal effort. Commercial seed suppliers normally offer a greater diversity of seeds, but typically at greater cost.

Germinating seed.

Although many books suggest starting seeds as early in the year as possible, to maximise the length of the first growing season, I have found that I get best results with a later start, sowing seeds in April or even May. Normally I sow seeds into 2 inch square pots containing a John Innes No. 2 compost. I usually put a layer of peat about 1 cm thick at the bottom of the pot, but I avoid peat in the seed-raising medium for fear of encouraging *Sciara* fly, the biggest pest problem when raising succulents from seed. Most seed is best sown on the surface of the compost, and pressed lightly into the surface, not buried at all. Larger seeds may be buried to a depth of no more than the seed diameter, although the treatment giving best results varies from species to species. The compost is wetted thoroughly by standing in a

centimetre or so of water for about a day, and maintained in a light environment (but not direct sun) for germination to occur.

I use a heated propagator box for this. It maintains a temperature of about 25°C (70 - 80°F), with high internal humidity. I seem to get better germination if there is some diurnal change in temperature, with cooler conditions at night, but this is based on casual observation, rather than controlled experiment. Some cycling of soil moisture is to be encouraged, but the soil should not be allowed to dry completely. Watering is done with a fine spray from above; if any seeds contain inhibitors of germination these are more effectively leached out this way than by continued watering from below. A thoroughly cleaned trigger-operated kitchen cleaner or starch spray pack is ideal for this. When a reasonable level of germination has been achieved, the propagator top can be removed and the humidity allowed to fall. Seeds will continue to germinate throughout the summer in many species.

Some species present particular difficulties. *Sclerocactus*, and some *Pediocactus* and *Tephrocactus* have large thick-walled seeds that may require seed coat abrasion and/or exposure to extremes of temperature to break dormancy. Such species are probably best not attempted by inexperienced seed raisers! Other cacti have particularly small seeds. These include *Strombocactus*, *Aztekium*, *Blossfeldia*, and some *Parodia*. Although these germinate easily, the seedlings are initially tiny, and are usually quickly overgrown by algae on the soil surface. These are probably best germinated under sterile, enclosed conditions, perhaps hydroponically on Phostrogen (or similar feed)-soaked coarse sand in closed containers. The problem then becomes weaning them from this protected environment to normal

greenhouse conditions when they are larger, one or two years later!

Problems.

A number of problems can spoil the pleasures of seed raising. The main one that troubles me is the almost inevitable formation of a crust on the surface of the compost after a few weeks. This comprises a mat of algal and fungal growth, together with some apparent chemical deposition of insoluble salts. This can form a dense layer, preventing aeration of the underlying compost, and thus inhibiting healthy root growth. It also overgrows small seedlings, causing their total loss, and provides a splendid environment for the development of *Sciara* fly larvae. Further, when it dries out it tends to curl up, and can lift tiny seedlings up with it. I have no total solution, but a number of strategies may be helpful.

Firstly, watering with water that has previously been boiled may help. Ideally using rainwater to minimise the dissolved calcium salts which contribute to the mineral component of the crust, boiling will kill algae present that may grow to form the biofilm. Boiling tap water will also reduce the dissolved calcium, which comes out of solution as scale. Second, growth of the crust may be discouraged if the propagator top is removed at a relatively early stage - too much humidity for too long seems to encourage its growth. Thirdly, judicious watering with a copper-based fungicide could be helpful, as algae are often killed by these compounds as well. I have not (yet) tried this, as copper compounds may also inhibit seed germination, but it remains an option if the problem gets too bad.

As indicated, *Sciara* flies are probably the main pest encountered during seed raising. The larvae live in the soil, eating organic

matter therein, which may often include the seedlings! They can be deterred by using a mineral, rather than peat-based, seed raising compost. If flies are seen, a soil drench with insecticide like Malathion usually does the trick, although this generally has to be repeated at regular intervals. Fungal damping-off can also be a problem, and is best treated with fungicidal soil drenches, but note the possible effects of these on seed as yet ungerminated. Taken overall I have not found damping-off to be enough of a problem to require routine treatment, except for avoiding keeping the germinating seed under conditions of saturated humidity for too long.

Pricking out.

Although some people recommend pricking out soon after germination, as soon as areoles (in the case of cacti) are evident, I have had best results leaving the seedlings undisturbed until the following Spring, unless there is a specific problem in individual pots. The seedlings are a bit bigger then, and the post-transplanting losses are reduced. However, the seedlings should not be allowed to dry out completely in winter.

I prick out into deep (Stewart) seed trays containing a layer of peat at the bottom (about 1 cm thick), followed by a mixture of equal parts John Innes No. 2 compost and a soilless compost (I use Arthur Bower's, but I expect any would be fine). This is capped with a layer 5 - 10 mm thick of the John Innes compost alone, to deter crust formation and *Sciara* fly, which can both still be a problem at this stage. Seedlings are grown on in these for at least 1 year, when they are usually ready to move on into pots. During the first few months in seed trays, it is best not to let the potting medium dry out too much.

Results.

If all goes well, a healthy batch of seedlings! Some succulents, like *Bulbine semibarbata*, can be flowering within one year from seed, and a few cacti can flower in their second year, although 3 -4 years is more normal. There will indisputably be some losses along the way - don't be too concerned, it is normal for a proportion of the seedlings not to make it through to maturity, and probably reflects in part genetic diversity in the seed. Some seedlings are likely to be ill-equipped to survive under the conditions of cultivation, and succumb rapidly. In nature, for a stable population, each plant will on average give rise to only one progeny that will live to reproduce itself! A high seedling mortality rate is not therefore unnatural, although with the benefits of cultivation we should aspire to rather more success than that! The 'runt' seedlings that never seem to grow should, perhaps be allowed to die, rather than be cosseted on to yield older plants that themselves never thrive.

However, the biggest problem for the successful seedraiser is likely to be what to do with the multiplicity of young plants now occupying all residual greenhouse space. On this topic I will write in a future article. In the meantime, good growing!

Ray Pearce.

