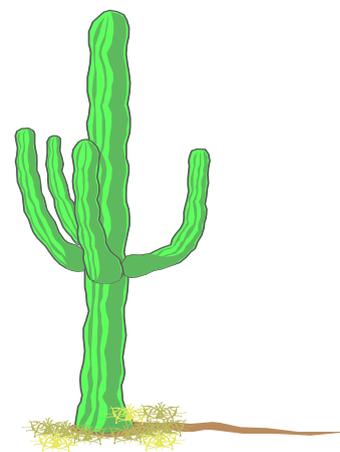


Oxotica

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

June 2010

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ALSTON HALL 2010

by Gillian Evison



Dorothy Minors first extended a warm invitation to speak at the Northern Weekend at Alston Hall in about 2005. Being a bear of very little automotive brain - the deathwish weave at major roundabouts a speciality - and hoping to live to retirement, I felt it safer to leave the drive north to others. Dorothy is not a lady to give up easily, however, and the invitation was regularly repeated. Last year, when the invitation came yet again, I happened to catch the other half in a mellow mood (or had word of the legendary catering reached beyond the cactophile world?) and he agreed to act as 'roadie' for the trip.

As first up on the Friday evening there were the usual worries of getting to the venue on time. It was the first outing for a new travel toy, which is supposed to re-route the SatNav if it finds road delays. Thirty minutes from home it cheerfully announced that there was a one and three quarter hour delay on the M40 and, congratulating ourselves on this near miss, we set off cross

country following our newly calculated route. Feeling unbearably smug we hit the motorway at the junction the SatNav had chosen, only to discover the major drawback with the new toy. The reason that the motorway beyond the junction was clear was because it was closed... The SatNav stubbornly refused to give up on the closed junction, which left us heading off cross-country again with a good old fashioned map and hoping the SatNav would come to its senses at some point.

Despite this, we made it in time to have an hour or so playing with the in-house plasma screen at the venue. Even with, or perhaps because of, high level poking in the menus by the 'roadie', the plasma device made anything green look like a day-glo jacket, so we were pleased to find a conventional drop down screen that we could use with my projector, thus allowing us to head off for that all important G&T.

The country house atmosphere of the Alston Hall makes it unique amongst cactus conventions and it came as no surprise that most of the delegates had been coming for years. I wouldn't be at all surprised if there was a waiting list and that you have to send Dorothy a hefty bribe to get in. The food was every bit as good as promised and the 'roadie' is still reminiscing about the beef, the steamed puddings and the variety of cakes on offer at the afternoon tea. The location is pretty fabulous as well with amazing views across the fields and the only noise pollution coming from grazing sheep.



It was great to have the opportunity to hear Johan de Vries talk about his travels in Bolivia and Patagonia, though his hair-raising tales of robberies, riots, overturned cars and having to politely turn down pressing invitations from the mayor to patronise the local brothel left the 'roadie' adamant that we would stick to the American Convention if we wanted a field trip. Paul Hoxey's presentations on Mexico and Chile had some superb habitat images and the other half got quite nostalgic seeing pictures of Copiapoas near the telescopes where he works.

As an amateur photographer, one of the many highlights of the weekend had to be Brian McDonough's talk on photography. Brian is a professional photographer, with experience in

product photography, and it was magical to see examples of how different and relatively simple types of artificial lighting (something that most of us think as scary and complicated) can really transform images of our favourite plants.

After the final tea it was time to head home, which after the excitement of the trip up was totally uneventful. For those wondering about giving the Northern weekend a whirl, I would most definitely recommend it, though you may have to wait years for a chance of getting in!

GE



No leftovers for the kitchen cat when the BCSS are in residence!

TALKING OF CATS . . .

The Alston Hall cat provides an unexpected link to John's piece on potting compost ingredients (back page of this issue).

A long-continuing thread on the BCSS Forum concerns the recommended use of cat litter as an ingredient of potting composts, in particular one of the Tesco's brands. Concern was expressed last year at the apparent disappearance of that brand from the stores, and in September I sent the following to the Forum:

"The Co-op sells a non-clumping cat litter which is the right stuff, I believe - calcined Danish moler clay. I have been using it successfully in my potting compost for several months. It was bought locally from a Midcounties Co-operative shop, but as they are supplied by the Co-operative Group I would expect it to be available at Co-op stores nationally."

I believe that for our purposes this has similar properties to the more expensive Seramis product from Germany.

DSG

**BRANCH MEETINGS
JULY - NOVEMBER 2010**

4th Thursday in month, 7:30 pm for 8:00 pm

*Please bring plants for the Table Show if you can -
each of these meetings except November*

22 July DR GEOFF BAILEY
Photography (Habitat and Greenhouse)

Geoff was the Secretary of the Society after the late Keith Grantham and was also Secretary of Manchester Branch. He has always been a keen photographer, even though he is prone to losing his camera (Kidlington National Show), and has had photographs published in both the BCSS and American Journals. He has been chosen to judge the latest photographic competition so I am sure that we will be able to pick up some good tips.

26 August BOB POTTER
Madagascar

This is a change to our programme as Brian Bates is unable to travel to the UK this year, so our good friend Bob has stepped into the breach and will provide us with his new talk on Madagascar. For anyone who missed his Socotra talk, you are in for a treat.

23 September JOHN FOSTER
Succulent Senecios

John is well known as a regular supporter of our show, he is also Chairman of Gloucester Branch and Zone 9 Representative; he has recently taken on the organization of the BCSS Calendar of Events. Tonight he will talk on one of his special interests, Senecios, one genera that not many of us know much about growing.

28 October JOHN ARNOLD
Parodia & Notocactus

John is a name that you should all recognise as he took over as Chairman of The Society after Bill Keen was elected President. He is the Society's Legal Eagle. He has spoken to the Branch on Melocacti but tonight he will give us some insight to one of the more popular genera of Parodia and Notocactus.

25 November
Branch AGM

Apart from the normal Branch business there will be Christmas nibbles and entertainment.

Cathy Darbon

FORTHCOMING EVENTS

BCSS INTERNATIONAL CONVENTION
Leicester University 23rd – 25th July 2010

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The Branch meets 7.30pm for 8pm on the 4th Thursday of each month (except December) at the Rose Hill Methodist Church, Rose Hill, Oxford OX4 4JP.

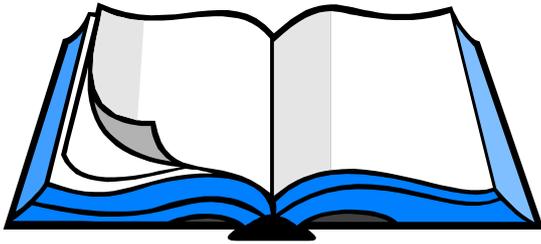
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ALL OUR YESTERDAYS

By Bill Darbon



You never quite know how to start an article, it just takes a spark to get you started. It was a passing comment by Mary at a committee meeting about the Branch's 50th anniversary that got me thinking about nostalgia. I of course can only go back to the Roaring 70's, but there are other members who can remember the halcyon days of Branch meetings with 20/30 in attendance, trips abroad and weekends away, of the Mullards, Dudleys, Cox's, Harrops, Billy Smith, Mrs Williams and many others.

So where to begin? John penned an article in December 1997 (Oxotica Vol 2) with excerpts from old newsletters provided by Alan (our president), so I decided to look back in the old journals to get some ideas of what we did then.

The first mention I could find is in the 1955 December newsletter of the Abingdon and District Branch holding an inaugural meeting in the Abbey Rooms at the Guildhall, Abingdon on 6th October where Mr A G Donaldson represented the Society and several of the Oxford members attended. Mr Bruton had started the Branch by staging an exhibit of 100 plants in July, with only 4 members in the Abingdon area. He was awarded a Silver Gilt for his display at the ROHS Show, by which time he had gathered enough members to form a branch. It was decided to stage a Branch exhibit at the Royal Oxford Horticultural Society Chrysanthemum Show on 10th & 11th November. We still have a Branch association with the ROHS annual event at Florence Park.

In the 1956 newsletter of the Abingdon and District Branch it said that they had staged a 27 foot display at the Royal Oxford Horticultural

Society Show in November 1955 where there were 400 plants exhibited, and had been awarded a Gold Medal (sadly no picture). I wonder how that compared with our displays at Blenheim (see picture on Branch web site); a note says that the Abingdon Branch was five weeks old at this time, and a kind donor had given the Branch a specimen 5ft *Opuntia* (OUCH !!)

A note in the June newsletter announced that the Abingdon and District Branch Show was due to be held on Saturday 1st September, details from Mr Bruton of Radley Road, Abingdon. It's nice when you see a name from the past that can still be linked to the present day (our show has the Bruton Cup as an award for the best Cristate) In the December edition the Abingdon and District Branch reported that the joint Fish and Cacti Exhibition was staged with the Oxford Aquaria Society in Oxford Town Hall for three days at the end of May and was a great success. Over 3,000 people attended and saw over 1,000 plants on display together with a special display of Aloes by the University Botanical Gardens; the venture was hoped to be repeated. I am not sure of the logistics of such an event nowadays with the Oxford parking restrictions. A Branch outing to Worfield Gardens and a summer dance at a member's garden had been enjoyed by the membership, and the Abingdon meetings were being held at Station Approach Assembly rooms.

In March 1957 it was reported that at the AGM in October it had been agreed to form a junior section, and the Branch membership in its first year had expanded from 18 to 60 members. Meetings were being held alternately at Abingdon and Oxford. November saw a display of Mammillarias by J W P Mullard, who will be remembered by some of you as a former Secretary of the Society. The Branch now had its own Newsletter and a note says that due to the fuel situation the proposed joint show had to be postponed. I presume that was the Suez Crisis – Oh for Petrol at those prices – perhaps we may even have ration cards again!

In June 1957 I note that the Abingdon Branch had a new headquarters at the Fitzharris Common Room. At the March meeting Oxford members of the Aquaria Society had been invited to attend the

talk and another joint exhibition was planned for September 1957.

September's newsletter reported a Branch visit in May to WT Neale at Worthing to the collection of Mr E Lamb. The May meeting was held at the University Botanical Gardens - if only we could rekindle some interest from them nowadays. The joint exhibition with Oxford Aquaria was held again at Oxford Town Hall over three days in September. We certainly could not attract the exhibitors we have at our show over three days. In March 1958 the Abingdon secretary was now a Mr A Walker from Whitecross Road and there was a short report about the joint show with The Oxford Aquaria Society. The main prize winner was Mr Bruton and there was a picture of Mrs Marwood examining a bowl garden.

I note that Oxford Branch was inaugurated by Mr A G Donaldson on 16th January 1958 at the Oriel College Lecture rooms followed by a talk "My ideas of succulent plants". The Branch Secretary was Mr D E Nutt from Ferry Road, New Marston.

At the February 1958 meeting at Oriel College three Entomologists from the Hope Department of Oxford University spoke on *insects as enemies*, something we all know too well. The Branch was planning another combined show with Oxford Aquaria at the Town Hall in September.

On 4th May 1958 the Branch had visited the nursery of the president Mr S V Smith at Stow where they saw his new large greenhouse. The May meeting had been addressed by the Branch Chairman Mr P R Mills and the June meeting by Miss W Dunn. Open days had been held at the homes of Mr & Mrs Marwood and Mr & Mrs Shirley and in July a visit to Worfield Gardens had not been spoiled by poor weather.

The December 1958 newsletter had two pictures from the Oxford Show with Oxford Aquaria Society (this appears to have been a very successful relationship), one of a large *Opuntia* still in its travelling crate and the other of Mrs Tonak examining a *Mammillaria rhodantha*. The Branch had been entertained in August by Mrs Stilwell, in September by Mr Spice of Messrs George Munro who gave an interesting talk about Plastic Film in Horticulture and in November by J W P Mullard with an illustrated talk of

Mammillarias in Flower from his own collection. John was well known for his love of this group of plants; I am sure that he looks down on our joint events with the *Mammillaria* Society (of which he was one of the leading pioneers).

In January 1959 the Oxford Branch Secretary had changed to Mr D & Miss D Candy who both gave a talk in February about plants in their collection. In March the late Mr A G Donaldson spoke on the differences between succulents and non-succulent plants and in April Mr J P Measures from Northampton spoke on Unusual Succulents. Mr A S Jones visited from Guildford in May and gave an illustrated talk on succulents in bloom, Mrs Stilwell of Windsor presented an interesting talk in July on "Plants I have flowered" and outings had been made to nurseries of Mr Smith at Stow in May and Mr A S Jones of Guildford in July.

to be continued.

Foot note:

I have enjoyed trawling back through the old journals and I think it shows that the Branch has always been very active, but also how important it is to report our activities for posterity, it's a shame that there are not more photographic records of some of the past events.

WD



LEWISIAS

by David Greenaway



Lewisias are rarely seen in our collections, and I suspect that they are mainly grown by the Alpine plant enthusiasts. However, they are hardy caudiciform succulents from mountain regions of western North America and can be entered in BCSS shows - Anacampseros Group, family Portulacaceae. At the CSSA convention in Seattle I admired the gorgeous flowers on the plants of Lewisia that local enthusiast Peter Gammarano had brought along to decorate the CSSA registration table. He later gave me a packet of Lewisia cotyledon seed, various flower colours, from his own plants.

I sowed half of them in the spring (of 2008), but only *one* seedling came up, which died that summer! I read up a bit and decided to give the seeds a cold treatment next time. In early February 2009 I sowed the remaining seeds in a small pot, soaked the compost well, covered it with a small plastic bag and put it in our unheated garage. Two or three weeks later I discovered that there had been a mass germination, despite (or because of) the intense cold over that period when the garage bottomed out at -2°C .

So far so good; the next thing was to read up on how to grow them the rest of the way to flowering.



In the late summer I pricked out 28 seedlings, 1 or 2 cm. across by then, into a seed tray of free-draining compost. The remaining five smallest ones went into a single pot. They all grew well during the autumn; Lewisias are basically winter-growers, which really means autumn and spring at our latitudes, especially the spring. This summer they will want to go dormant, so I shall then keep them in a shady, relatively cool, place. Experts say to water well in the spring, very carefully at other times and keep almost dry in the summer. The plants are said to be very frost-hardy if protected from excess moisture.



Some species, of which *L. cotyledon* is one, have evergreen rosettes attached to the thickened taproot. Cuttings form, which can be taken and rooted and so provide another means of propagation.

Some species are deciduous, and *Lewisia rediviva* is a good example of this. On their pioneering expedition from the Missouri River to the Pacific north-west in 1804, Lewis and Clark found that the Indians ate, despite its bitterness, spaetlum, the dried roots of a plant. The English common name for spaetlum is “bitterroot”. The seedsman Mc Mahon (later being honoured in the genus *Mahonia* by the German botanist Pusch) received the first roots in the dormant state, and it was only in the cooler days of autumn that green foliage appeared on these apparently lifeless roots. Pusch honoured Lewis (posthumously) by giving his name to this new genus, calling the bitterroot *Lewisia rediviva*, meaning “restored to life”.

I had not seen any *Lewisias* for sale locally, until last summer when I called in at the rare plants nursery on the Steventon road at East Hanney, and found that he too had grown them from seed. So I bought a couple of plants, one of which was still in flower. In the autumn I discovered that the Wantage Focus DIY was selling off some adult *Lewisias* at 5 for £5. I brought one along for the Branch raffle in October. Another spent the winter under a patio table (as a test) and coped with -16°C with no trouble.



Plants from *Focus DIY*

These plants put on a spurt of growth in May, when they developed flower structures. They needed a lot of water during this time, and the first flower appeared on 4th June.

Just now our Wantage garden centre also has (unnamed) *L. cotyledon* hybrids, so I suspect that they are commonly to be found in the nurseries' Alpine sections. Ashwood nurseries in the West Midlands are world-recognised specialists and

have some of the rarer species and many named hybrids for sale. They won a Gold Medal at Chelsea for their *Lewisias*.

Jean and I had a weekend in Edinburgh in September last year and I visited the Botanical Garden. They had a long cold frame of big, mature *Lewisia* species and hybrids in pots next to the Alpine House.

Also last year I bought from Keith Larkin a beautiful book just called “*Lewisias*”, by B. LeRoy Davidson. In addition to photographs of the plants in cultivation and habitat, Davidson's text is accompanied by botanical paintings in colour. LeRoy says that everyone agrees that there are about eighteen or nineteen species. I don't know of any other books on the subject, but he says that there was a monograph on them in 1966 by Roy Elliott for the British Alpine Society and another by Brian Matthew (Kew) in 1989.

ANOTHER HARDY SUCCULENT

I have had a plant for donkey's years which I bought as, and have always known as, *Graptopetalum paraguayense*. You all know it – it is a very common plant and it roots from its fleshy cream leaves which get knocked off very easily. The oldest plant of this had become very straggly, so I put it outside, on top of an old dustbin which was rarely used, to fend for itself. This was a few years ago and it has lived through getting on for ten winters since then, without any protection from rain or frost. It is certainly frost-hardy to -16°C, which was this winter's minimum here, and now in June it is growing and flowering again.

It puzzles me that a sub-tropical plant like this could be so hardy. Despite its name, it is from Mexico. Perhaps it grows at high altitude in habitat and has developed frost-hardiness as a result. Or did my plant become acclimatised here? I did not know that was possible, so perhaps it isn't!

DSG

DROOLING SPINES

by John Watmough

Here is a list of local suppliers of compost ingredients. It can be amended if members of the Branch would care to add their knowledge.

John Innes compost is still available from Goundreys on Enstone Airfield Industrial Estate, but after several company takeovers it now comes in bags marked "Roffey Brothers Ltd". However, it seems to be the same inside. You can also buy **Cornish Grit** there. The young lady in charge said that it was rather more finely ground than usual, but I reckon it is even better for mixing into the compost. But they no longer sell sundries, i.e. labels etc.

Crushed flint under the "Jondo" label can be bought from Countrywide Farmers, who are next to the filling station on Ducklington Road Roundabout, Witney. It comes in four types, Turkey, Hen, Chick and Mixed Chicken. Turkey is good for bottom drainage and top dressing for larger plants; however, it is not always available there. Hen is good for top dressing and for mixing into the compost. Chick is only valuable for mixing into the compost, but the finer texture makes it good for seed raising. Mixed Chicken contains a lot of lime fragments so it is not suitable for all plants. Ask at the till for availability; they will check their stock, take your money and direct you to their loading bay.

Dorset Gravel otherwise known as "Aquarium gravel" is the best top dressing for smaller plants. It consists of tiny round pebbles. It can probably be got from most aquarium suppliers. Large sacks of it are available at Maidenhead Aquatics, London Road, Wheatley.

Limestone for top dressing, suitable for lime-loving plants such as the white-spined Mamms, can usually be had from Notcutts at Nuneham Courtenay. It comes in graded multicoloured fragments, but the predominant colour is white. Look out for **Grit-Sand**. This is rare but is an ideal additive for Mesembs and other plants from the same region such as Tylecodons.

Oyster Shell. Because of the way it fragments into conchoidal plates, it is an ideal additive to compost for lime-lovers. It helps to keep the compost open and free-draining. It can be got from Charles Hunt and Partners, Unit 1, Rockfort Industrial Estate, Hithercroft Road, Wallingford OX10 9DB.

Martin Doorbar says he is definitely coming back to this country in January 2011. He intends to buy a house somewhere south of Oxford that will be near enough for him to resume his active membership of our Branch. He will also be resuming stewardship of the National Thelocactus Collection.

Martin has very generously given the Branch a large number of seedling cacti, some of which, mainly Ariocarpus, are already saleable, but most of which will probably be ready for sale next year or the year after. We are particularly grateful to Martin because a fair proportion of Branch income is derived from the sale of plants that have been donated.

JW



Graptopetalum paraguayense DSG