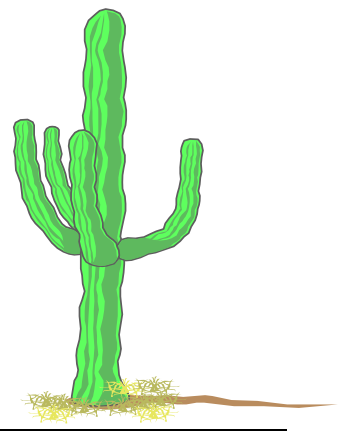


Oxotica

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

June 2017

Volume 22, Number 1



CHAIRMAN'S CHAT

Hi folks, we are well into the year and our plants should now be beginning to grow and flower. I am not sure if the weather or my lack of attention and the late frost are putting my plants off, but hopefully they will start to pick up now the good weather is here and I have been able to water and feed them.

The first six months of Branch meetings have seen some first time visiting speakers to us, so I hope that those who have attended the meetings have enjoyed their presentations from Rebutias to Argentina, Madagascar and the Caribbean. It is pleasing that we have seen some new faces coming along to the meetings, so I hope that they will continue to enjoy the friendship and hospitality that we offer.

The new format of the BCSS AGM with speakers and plants sales seemed to do the trick by attracting a larger number of members in attendance.

As I write, we are looking forward to our Branch events of plants sales at Bury Knowle and Wychford Pottery and the Display at Blenheim Palace Flower Show and of course the Show in August - you should all have received a schedule either by hand or post, so do try and come along and even enter a few plants - the more the merrier.

We are combining with our friends in Reading Branch again this year on 16th July for a joint open day; details of the timings and locations will be published on our web site.

Don't forget the special Branch Meeting on 27th July - an opportunity for members to bring along their plants to a "Plant Forum," identify those plants you are not sure about or discuss any particular problems and get some general advice. It's an open forum so do try and come along.

Good growing

Bill Darbon

**BRANCH MEETINGS
JULY-NOVEMBER 2017**

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

We are always open to suggestions for the programme so if there is someone or something that you would like us to arrange please speak to one of the committee.

**July 27 MEMBERS' EVENING
"My favourite plant or plants"**

Tonight we are trying something NEW - we invite YOU to come along to talk about your favourite plant or plants; this is planned to be an interactive forum - an opportunity where we can all share some of our successes or failures.

**August 24 KEITH AND KATHY
FLANAGAN
"Agaves"**

We welcome back our friends from Reading, Keith & Kathy to talk about Agaves, any of you who visited their collection at last year's Open Day will have seen some of the marvellous specimens that they grow. Tonight I believe will feature plants grown in UK.

**September 28 CHRIS DAVIES
"Roving in North East Mexico"**

We welcome Chris back to the branch from our neighbouring branch at High Wycombe. Chris is the Chair of the

Mammillaria Society with whom we have had successful joint shows. He has travelled widely in Mexico so I am sure we will see some of that Group of plants in habitat.

**October 26 STUART RILEY
"What's New"**

Stuart is the proprietor of 'plant life nursery' which he runs with his wife, and is regularly seen around the show circuit. He is a qualified judge and regularly visits the USA. He has a vast knowledge of both Cacti & Succulents so I am sure we will enjoy his presentation about newly introduced plants.

**November 23
BRANCH
ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING
Followed by a social get together**

Bill Darbon

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The Branch meets 7.30pm for 8pm on the 4 th Thursday of each month (except December) at the Rose Hill Methodist Church, Rose Hill, Oxford OX4 4JP.		
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OXFORD BRANCH 60th ANNIVERSARY

I was reminded at the last committee meeting that **2018** is the anniversary of the formation of the Oxford Branch, although our sister Branch at Abingdon had been running for 3 years before and some of the members attended both branch meetings back then.

Your committee is anxious that we should celebrate the event and has decided that we will have an Anniversary Lunch and Bumper Show.

Sadly, there are not many folk who were around then, but I was perhaps thinking of putting together an Anniversary Booklet or collating any particular memories that you may have stored of your participation in the Branch's activities over the past 60 years for publication in this magazine.

So if you have any special memories or old pictures from yesteryear do let me know and we will see what we can do.

Bill Darbon (Chairman)



Distinguished visitors to the Oxford Branch show at Langdale Hall 15 July 2001
Sheila Collenette, Len Newton, Tom McCoy, John Lavranos, John Wood.

DROOLING SPINES

by John Watmough

ANNIVERSARIES

The inaugural meeting of NCSS Oxford Branch took place in January 1958. This means that our Diamond Jubilee is coming up next year, so the question arises: how shall we celebrate it? An extra show would impose a great deal of labour on our usual members without commensurate returns. Also, it would be pointless to hold a one-off Convention in National Convention Year. So the Branch Committee has decided, subject to any other ideas being forthcoming, simply to designate 2018 as Oxford Branch Diamond Jubilee Year. All our publications and events would be marked accordingly. So our programme card, our very successful events and information leaflet, and our Show schedule plus the front page of our Branch website can be expected to mark the occasion.

Speaking of anniversaries, Brian and Margaret Conway celebrated their sixtieth wedding anniversary on June 1st. The Branch were delighted to offer their congratulations by way of a card signed by all the members attending the last Branch meeting plus a bottle of the finest fizz. It can be reported that our card was last seen on the Conway mantelpiece next to another card bearing a portrait of Her Majesty the Queen.

Looking further forward, has anyone any ideas about how to celebrate an anniversary that falls due in 2021? That is, the four-hundredth anniversary of the first ever erection of a greenhouse in this country – in Oxford!

SEEDS OF DESPAIR

Your correspondent, who seems to be regarded as a bit of a muggins in some quarters, often finds himself the recipient of cactus and succulent seed. He is not really an expert in growing it, though eager donors tell him that he is, in order to find a home for what they are too lazy or too busy to deal with themselves. He confesses to having sown 480 packets of seed in the last three years, without making much impression on the big tin marked “Seeds” in his dining room/initial preparation laboratory. His sowing method might be termed the “blunderbuss method” - lots of blunders and occasionally missing the bus. However, he has often gamely attempted to germinate *Echinocactus horizonthalonius*, the seeds of which are wished on him because they are notoriously difficult to propagate from. He has indeed succeeded in raising the occasional specimen, after stabbing the seeds (and his fingers) with a pin, or soaking them (seeds and fingers) in household bleach.

You will be dying to know whether there is an infallible method of germinating the seed of this beautiful cactus. Indeed there is, and it came courtesy of Steven Brack, recently of Mesa Gardens. The trick is to leave them in a cupboard for twenty-five years and then sow them. When this vital information was passed to a well-known grower in North London, he had a hissy fit, and his temper was not improved when your correspondent laughed at him.

JOURNEY'S END IN CACTUS MEETINGS

One of the joys of helping at the numerous events that our Branch stages throughout the season is the prospect of meeting all manner of interesting people. Forget about the glassy-eyed young man who used to frequent cactus sales events asking "Got any buttons?". It is comforting to know that there are hobbies whose aficionados are even madder than we are. For instance, there was the man who built a full size steam engine in his living room – his wife only left him when he powered it up.

A useful story came from a bird enthusiast (not a twitcher, please – twitchers are like train spotters only more juvenile) who was a raptor specialist. He told your correspondent that he knew where several raptors were nesting in the East Midlands in places where according to the books they had no business to be. He would not tell the RSPB because the information would leak into the possession of egg thieves. This exactly mirrors the situation in our own hobby, where the location of new discoveries is usually kept confidential to prevent wielders of spades and trowels.

It has been a sense of mischief on the part of your correspondent that he has enjoyed giving the local councillor a big kiss when she was in the company of the Lord Mayor at Bury Knowle Park. It must have been a similar sense of mischief that induced Sir Ian McKellar, opening Blenheim Flower Show last year, to give your correspondent a big cuddle. It is no use denying it – it is probably on You Tube for anyone desperate to research it. It has to be said that Sir Ian revealed himself to be not an egotistical thespian but a thoroughly pleasant person, someone genuinely interested in other people and their multifarious activities.

This paragraph is really a plea, because the Branch (like all organisations) could benefit from more helpers at its generally entertaining and profitable events. In addition, the Branch would naturally welcome your spare plants as a gift or as plants to be sold on your behalf. The Branch has even reduced its commission to 10% as an inducement.

SOME HAVE CACTI THRUST UPON THEM

...And nobody has cacti and succulents thrust upon them more than Oxford Branch. At the last count, over the last three years we have taken in no fewer than twelve collections or part collections. There may be more than twelve – the memory gets fuzzy. Thus at various times plants have taken over the Darbon garden, the Watmough bedroom, and the entire ground space in the Doorbar Crystal Palace. Not to mention the Stone patio, covered in Aeoniums and Sempervivums. These plants have been auctioned, posted round the world, and sold up and down the country at lecture talks and cactus events. Some plants have even been chopped up to make yet more plants! Even so, it has been necessary to buy in the occasional carload from a wholesale nursery in order to fulfil our obligations.

WHAT'S BUGGING ME

by David Greenaway

No, not bugs like the *Campylobacter* that recently affected me, nor the ones like the WannaCry which affected many computers this year, but those that affect our plants, especially Mealy Bugs and Red Spider Mites (RSM).

I have no problem any more with root mealy bug: I have not seen a case of this in my plants since the nineties, when I went over to more mineral composts. Top-side is another matter. To be fair, the majority of my cacti and other succulents are free from this bug (perhaps they don't like the taste?), but with some it is a constant battle. The most prone to mealy bug attack are my plants of *Astrophytum ornatum* and *A. myriostigma*; *Homalocephala texensis*, in fact *Ferocactus in general*; *Opuntia* (rufida-type); some *Theलोcephala*; *Discocactus*; *Melocactus*; some *Aeonium*, *Echeveria*, *stapeliads* etc.

The trouble may date back to the withdrawal of dimethoate for sale to us gardeners, and malathion before that. The Nanny State, assuming that I cannot use products responsibly, caused pestilence as a result. Back in the nineties I was ordering bottles of concentrated sulphuric acid and fuming nitric acid, "for horticultural purposes" I would say, from a local chemist shop; I used small portions at a time to lower the acidity of the very alkaline tap water that I had to use. Later they were only allowed to sell me dilute acid. But I digress.

My cacti used to be more or less free of RSM, and there are pictures to prove it; I used to put plants in our annual show, but no longer (though this is also because the standard of the show has increased so much – a good thing). I used to find plants to put in our monthly table show quite easily, but now I have difficulty in finding anything that is worthy (though this is also due to my tardiness in repotting). RSM has now been rife in the collection for many years.

Apart disfiguring the plants, RSM can be a killer. I have had many losses which look to be from this cause. These are my plants that are most prone to RSM: most *Rebutia* and *Sulcorebutia* (but the longer-spined *R. albopilosa* seems to be immune), *Chamaecereus silvestrii* (all dead), *Fraileas* (all dead), some *Mammillarias*, *Echinomastus*, many *Echinocereus*, some *Echinopsis* and *Lobivias*, and so on. Any of these that are not dying, I consider to be in 'intensive care'. One has to be stoic about losses, and take heart by the creation of valuable SPACE.

Other succulents and some cacti seem to be immune to RSB attack. The mites often seem to favour the cacti with short, dense spination; perhaps sprays cannot reach these plant bodies. To attack the mites I have been using Bug Clear Ultra and SB Plant Invigorator since last year. I read that I should splash water around to increase the humidity in the greenhouses, so that may be a way forward as well. I find that one effective tool against the mealy bugs is methylated spirit, and another is blasting the bugs away with a water jet; repotting is a good

time for this. When Stuart Riley last spoke to the branch he mentioned that disease preferentially strikes plants in poor health, so perhaps my present serious attempt at repotting will make a big difference.

Since writing most of this piece, I have seen the article in the June 2017 Cactus World and the newsletter from Alan Bromley. I also happened to listen to Radio Four's 'Farming Today' on Saturday 17th of this month. It was on crop protection that morning, and started with a visit to the Plant Pathology Laboratory at Reading University. The interviewer was invited to look down a microscope at - female mealy bugs! They emit sex pheromones to attract the males (who only live two or three days). Reading is concerned to learn more about these pheromones and perhaps develop disruptive regimes. May they succeed!

David Greenaway



Rebutia albipilosa, 9 June 2017