

British Cactus & Succulent Society

Southampton & District Branch Newsletter

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| | |
|----------------------------|---|
| Editorial | 1 |
| Announcements | 1 |
| Last Month's Meeting..... | 1 |
| Bookworm Corner | 6 |
| Forthcoming Events..... | 6 |
| Next Month's Meeting | 6 |

Editorial

After a very dreary January (weatherwise) – can you remember what the sun looks like - February seems to have got off to a better start. Nowadays we seem to get snow each winter and there was a decent amount 3 weeks ago, with everything blanketed in white for a few days. On the whole, temperatures have not been too bad and the current weather makes it seem like spring is just round the corner.

Inspired by some of the cultivation talks at our branch in recent years, I ordered several types of seed from the BCSS seed list which came with the December journal. It was a welcome chance to buy seeds locally rather than overseas. The seeds arrived two weeks ago and I hope to plant them soon.

Announcements

Copies of the **Branch Programme** for 2013 are available from the front table.

If you haven't already done so, please renew your BCSS membership. The **membership renewal** forms were sent with the December journal, and you can also renew online from the BCSS website, at www.bcss.org.uk/paypal.php

Last Month's Meeting

The January meeting followed the usual format of short talks given by the branch's own members.

First up were **Mark** and **Sue**, with a digital presentation titled "Why Are There No Aloes?" This was actually a talk about a holiday in the Canary Islands in 2011. Mark stood at the front and did the talking while Sue drove the laptop – it was also Sue who had put together the digital presentation.

We started with some maps which showed the Canaries off the northwest coast of Africa. Known as the Macaronesia archipelago, the group of 7 major islands are about 70 miles off the coast of Morocco. The islands have bypassed everything that's gone on in Africa and Europe for millions of years and Mark explained that they vary considerably in their climate and vegetation, even across a particular island.

The central five islands consist of Tenerife, La Palma, La Gomera, El Hierro and Gran Canaria. They visited in November and stayed on Tenerife. Accommodation was available either in Los Cristianos on the south, or a villa on the western side – and they opted for the latter and got a place called Casa Gallina for £250 for the week – and this even included a pet dog!

Tenerife measures about 80km by 60km and has a population just shy of 1 million. It is a volcanic island, dominated by the peak of Mount Teide and most of the population lives near the coast rather than inland. A geographical map showed that the island was quite green on the north but sandy along the south and east. The north receives rainfall of 1000-1500mm a year, whereas the south receives around 300mm. The south is also 10 degrees warmer.

To understand the geology of the islands, you have to go back a long way - 60 million years ago, the Canary volcanic hotspot developed, and around 50 to 55 million years ago, the Atlantic started to open up, and by 12 million years BC, Tenerife had emerged. Between 12 million and 9 million years ago there were three big volcanic episodes, each lasting a million years and then there was another phase of 3 million years which created the islands as they are now. In the late Miocene period (~2 million BC), animals and plants from the mainland started to colonise the islands. We were shown some amusing representations of what a BCSS member from 2 million years ago might have looked like, along with one from three thousand years ago. The first modern people to reach the islands were probably from the Berber tribes of North Africa, and they would have lived in caves and huts on the islands.

Not only were the Canaries isolated, there is also a huge variation in climates, from sea level to 4000m. This provided flexibility since people could move up and down the mountain sides, to contend with changes in temperature. Tenerife sports several types of plant habitat, and starting from the bottom, at a range of 0 to 700m, there is an arid semi-desert area of open scrub, similar to what is found in Morocco and the Mediterranean. This is called Euphorbia Scrub and it receives 200-400mm of rain a year. They found some beautiful and aged examples of *Euphorbia balsamifera*, which is also found in North Africa. Some of the plants may well be hundreds of years old. It is easy to identify because it has a single terminal flower. *Euphorbia regis-jubae* looks similar but it has a panicle of flowers. Altogether, there are around 16 types of Euphorbia on the islands. A yellow flowered plant was a Senecio and next we saw a member of the Crassulaceae, probably a sedum. Mark mentioned that large parts of the island are used to grow bananas and this gobbles up the available ground, but it was good to see there are still patches of scrub around. Looking down from the cliff, they saw a view of neat rows of cacti such as *Echinocereus grusonii* and blue cerei – these were being cultivated outdoors by plant nurseries.

The second habitat is rocky, and is also dominated by Euphorbias. There were large examples of *Euphorbia canariensis*, with nice blue stems – his at home is green. The soil here is classified as skeletal. There were also plants of *Euphorbia regis-jubae* and some Echiiums. Half an hour of walking got you to an altitude of 1600m. These areas are warm with very little rainfall. A photo showed water pipes above the ground - water has to be piped everywhere. Mark said it must be difficult for the native wildlife, which would need to go down to the plains for a drink. Endemic to Tenerife is *Euphorbia atropurpurea*, with purple flowers. Another big group of plants which the Canaries are famous for are the Aeoniums. It was hard to identify them, even though they had a book on the flora of the Canaries. In many cases, you can't really identify the species unless you see the flowers. The example was perhaps *A. ciliatum*. There are also asclepiads on the island, and *Periploca laevigata* is a shrubby vine ("silkvine") with a ceropogia-type flower.

The third of the habitats is the cliff habitat. The hard basaltic lava flow is around 12 million years old and if there's only one part you have time to visit, this should be it, because of the variety of vegetation. There were many examples of *Euphorbia canariensis* dotted amongst the hillsides, their bright green stems contrasting against the dark rock. We also saw *Euphorbia aphylla*. We saw the related

genus *Monanthes*, of which there are 15-16 species on the island, including one which migrated from the continent to the island and then become extinct on the continent. We also saw *Aeonium tabuliforme* and a plant which was not succulent but perhaps the rarest plant in the presentation, called *Vieraea laevigata* – it is a daisy which grows in the rock crevices. Another smallish aeonium might have been *A. haworthii*.

The next habitat was artificial. With people living nomadically, some of the land had been used for terrace cultivation but this had been given up as the islands turned to tourism. Plants such as Euphorbias had colonised these areas. The Canary Pine also grows here, normally it is found at higher altitudes. *Senecio kleinia* (*Kleinia nerifolia*) is a succulent member of the compositae. There are 50+ species of *Sonchus* (sow thistle) on the islands. We also saw a stray plant of *Opuntia ficus-indica*. These are cultivated and used to make jam and other things, including the dye cochineal. The flowers of this are mainly yellow but can vary. Other agricultural areas they saw included old abandoned fruit orchards. There was some grass in this area - the berber people used to live in the valley and they used to keep goats. The Canaries are also famous for the dragon tree, *Dracaena draco* and he brought a little specimen. Some of these are hundreds of years old and one has a recorded girth of 78 feet. They saw the Canary palm *Phoenix canariensis* in towns and along roadsides, but he saw very few in habitat. They also came across a cristate Aeonium. *A. holochrysum* has sticky leaves and multiple stems with yellow flowers. They saw some Aeoniums at an altitude of 1800 feet, so some can obviously take temperatures as low as 2-3°C.

The next habitats are tree heath/evergreen forests, transitioning to pine savannah. *Erica arborea* grows in a distinct zone which then transitions into the Canary Pine forest. It is lovely walking through these. We saw a shot of Mount Teide, the highest point on the island. Other plants that grow here include helianthemums, cistus and daphnes. The Canary pine is the only pine that can burn down to the ground and still shoot up from the base. Laurisilva refers to an ancient forest in the cloud zone. Ranging from 400m to 1300m., it is wet enough for ferns and mosses to grow here, as well as 4 species of bay laurel.

The botanic gardens at Puerto de la Cruz towards the north of Tenerife are really nice. Dating from 1790 it houses many exotic plants. We saw Spanish moss, tropical ferns, *Aloe plicatilis*, bromeliads and the bird of paradise flower, *Strelitzia regina*. There were also large cycads, including one about to

flower. There was a huge ficus with stems 30-40 feet high. We also saw a jack fruit – these can get to 80 kilos in weight.

The final habitat is way up above the Canary Pines, at Las Canadas Caldera. This is a rocky dome and there is not a succulent in sight. The pea family has settled here, including broom, scabious, echiums and bugloss. It was time to show us some of the wildlife, and this included Berthelot's Pipit, wild canaries, a blue chaffinch, a barbery (falcon) and a sardinian warbler. There was also a large lizard who was quite obliging. We ended with a view of the sun setting over Mount Teide, followed by a spectacular sunset above the cloud base.

The next speaker was **Ben Turner**, who described a trip to Madeira in 2012. Madeira is known for impressive Botanic gardens at Monte Palace, which are well worth a visit. He was walking down from Madeira's equivalent of Alton Towers to the town of Funchal, and halfway down the hill he noticed a collection of succulents in a courtyard. On closer inspection he found an amazing collection being grown in a small area about half the size of our meeting hall. The collection was owned by Isabel and Vito Bretas and he found them to be a very nice and hospitable couple. Isabel spoke good English and he ended up spending a couple of hours there.

The plants he first saw included a cereus and pots of aloes and agaves, the latter being grown in terracotta pots hanging off the side of a wall. Every inch of space had been used, with plants of all types everywhere. Some of the plant labels indicated the plants were from Specks and other German and Belgian sellers. On Madeira, cactus and succulent growing is not a popular hobby – there isn't even a local society – so Isabel had to buy all the plants by mail order. This is somewhat sad since the climate is ideal and you can also get pumice easily.

We saw some closer shots of the Agaves and Aloes and some of the cacti. There was a sizeable cereus, and *Kalanchoe beharensis* and *Kalanchoe* cv "Fang". There were also sizeable plants of *Rhipsalis* and *Sedum morganianum*. *Agave utahensis eborispina* is one of the nicer ones to grow. The audience thought that the cereus was *Echinopsis (Trichocereus) pachanoi* - there were some open flowers as well as the remains of the previous evening's flowers on the plant. There were a number of unusual Pachypodiums and caudex plants, and a view down into the main area showed the selection of the Pachypodiums.

Just above the garage - 8 feet off the ground - were more plants, including a variegated *Agave lophantha*

(now *A. univittata variegata*). An agave in flower was *Agave potatorum* and he was given a pup of that. The cacti included *Ferocactus*, *Echinocactus* and *Stenocactus*. Isabel spent a great deal of time and money on her hobby. A creeping plant with a caudex was an *Adenia*. We saw close ups of a nice healthy pachypodium and also a monstrose *Cereus peruvianus*. A *Tephrocactus* was in good condition. *Euphorbia valida* looks similar to *E. meloformis*. She was also growing air plants, these were on a wall, next to a large *Beaucarnea*. She also had the Hawaiian palm *Brighamia insignis* which forms a caudex and needs a fair amount of heat. We saw closer shots of *Kalanchoe* cv. "Fang", the big *Kalanchoe beharensis* and another *beaucarnea* smothered in Spanish moss. Their living space and lounge was alive with plants! There was a nice monstrose *Euphorbia*. *Pilea* was growing everywhere like a weed, and we saw a *Stenocactus*, and *Gasteria croucheri*. She took him over to her propagation area and started giving him her spare plants and cuttings, eventually he ended up with a boxful to bring home. Fortunately there are no issues moving plants across the EU, although he took the soil off. There were no pests on the plants but it is always wise to check plants carefully when you introduce any new plants into your collection. He has kept in email contact with Isabel and invited her over to our meetings, although she did say that she does not travel.

The next day he went to the botanical garden. There was a small section on native plants, and one of these is *Aeonium glandulosum*. He also came across the best display of a stapeliad he's ever seen – it was a *Stapelia gigantea* smothered in buds and flowers, which were creamy with red markings. The flies were just loving this plant. Some parts of the garden were in poor condition, with plants which had been damaged still left lying around. *Opuntia tunicata* looks great with its glistening white spines but if you get the spine in you, it is impossible to remove it whole. There was one of these plants at Wisley and it had to be removed for health and safety reasons. A columnar plant with finely spaced ribs was a *Neobuxbaumia*, but this had collapsed into sections and was in poor condition. There was a lot of space here to add new plants. One thing he found annoying was that there was graffiti everywhere, with names cut into the big plants, something worse than vandalism since it will never grow out. We also saw a large palm – however, there is an infestation of palm beetles which is ravaging these plants across the island. Treatment costs £2k-£3k per plant and they just haven't got the money, so in time the plants will just disappear.

The next speaker was **Paul Maddison**. He mentioned that last year he gave a talk on the "Simulacraceae" and one of the pictures he had shown was a detailed miniature pottery sculpture. He showed these pictures again, and mentioned that this was the work of quite a famous artist, Carl Spitzberg.

He is a fan of art and nature and architecture and showed us a picture of London's futuristic-looking Stratford Centre bus terminus and railway station, thronged with tourists. Why were there so many people here? Well, 2012 was a great year for Britain with the Jubilee and the Olympics.

At the hockey stadium, there was so much orange in the crowd because the Netherlands were playing – "They get everywhere, the Dutch" quipped David Neville. Paul said it was a marvellous crowd and great atmosphere. He attended the Paralympics and we saw views of the main stadium which holds 80000 people. In the morning session, they were 2/3rds of the way up the stadium and could see the big screens at the ends. In the evening they were on the other side. He showed pictures of a typical event starting off. There was something special about one of the long jump and a steward was holding a sign asking for silence – this was because the athlete was blind and was relying on sounds from his trainer to pace him during the jump. We also saw pictures that he took of the 1500m race, with the crowd getting more and more excited and cheering as the race progressed, with David Weir eventually winning for Britain,

Stratford Park is quite big and has been set up with different meadow-like environments. It is a little artificial since they have crammed in more plants than you would see in nature but it is still a good representation of what you might see in our countryside. Some of the surrounding buildings in the shot were temporary for the Olympics, but the park will remain, and the plants are carefully chosen so that they will self-seed and maintain the meadows. They had also planted out fairly mature trees, having grown them at nurseries such as Hilliers and other specialist nurseries. Luckily, the wet weather last year kept them well watered and helped them to settle in. We saw some distance shots of some of the buildings and the hockey stadium. There were also pictures of an egg-shaped entertainment building. We also saw him posing in front of plants which had been planted more or less vertically – as it happens, this was outside an electric supply *plant* room. Another picture showed the clouds above, followed by a sunnier shot featuring some flowers. Some hazel branches had been used to make structures to represent arts and

crafts and we ended with a shot of orange, yellow and blue flowers with the stadium behind.

Next was something different – he visited Painton Zoo while on holiday in Devon. Ignoring the animals, we were shown the hot house, with various cacti planted out. There were colourful birds flying around too. A tree fern seemed to be dying and nearby was an Iris which seemed to be endemic to the area. We saw close ups of another similar iris growing outside the hot house. While they were at Brixham, they took a walk from the caravan site to a hill fort in the distance, along a track and there were numerous plants along the way.

A thistle had large magenta flowers and Paul explained how they are related to the artichokes that we eat. For the next picture, the camera had managed to focus on the foliage instead of the flowers – this was a tiny sedum which looked large initially but we got an idea of the scale since the next shot featured Paul's boot next to the plant. It was shady in this area so there were quite a number of small things growing here. Out in the grasslands there were a wide variety of plants, some of which only grow here. Closer to the hill fort, the meadow of flowers was sparser than at Stratford Park. A blue spike of flowers was identified by the audience as Viper's bugloss - *Echium vulgare* - a distant relative of the plants we saw in the first talk on the Canaries. Paul said the purple-blue colour in the photo was not far off the real colour. Some of the walls were being rebuilt and they were introducing some wild flowers in between. Paul ended the talk with a rather beautiful picture of a sedum-like plant which had coloured up nicely in the sunlight – it had orange red leaves and white flower buds.

David Neville rounded off the evening by showing some pictures taken when he was last in mainland Mexico, in 2010. Travelling with John Pilbeam and Derek Bowdery and also two Canadian friends who live in the outskirts of Oaxaca, this was a trip to see *Echeveria laui* in habitat. John Pilbeam had just written the book on Echeverias, and *E. laui* is the nicest of the lot, but John had not seen it in the wild. The plant only grows in one locality where Lau found it, and although it was said to be inaccessible and a 3 day hike from anywhere, that isn't true. The area has been turned into a reserve and there are footpaths and you can access the location within half an hour, where you can find the small number growing in one patch. There is also a sign proclaiming the plant, however this location is quite remote so you wouldn't stumble across it by accident. As they started to make their way through the path - there is no public access – so you have to go to the local village and pay for a guide. It was

10am in the morning and the sun was getting hot. Their guide was already drunk with tequila and had a glazed vacant look - he fell off the narrow path several times, and was much worse than John Pilbeam who has a bad hip - unfortunately, in much of mainland Mexico, drinking is a problem. We also saw a picture of Mary McLenahan, their Canadian friend. *Ferocactus recurvus* is not one of the more attractive Feros. A view showed the pathway and they also passed under a huge *Pachycereus pringlei*.

Next was a very tall shrub, some 10 feet tall. David explained that it was a stinging jatropa, and the effects of touching it are a hundred times worse than a stinging nettle - it can cause ulcerated blisters which can last several days. It had a white flower and ivy-type leaves. From the audience Paul Klaassen said he had run into a shrub like that but had managed to recover within a few hours. Perhaps that plant was in growth and less potent - there are different types and some are worse than others.

They had to endure the drunken guide's ramblings - he had been on a training course - but Jim and Mary knew more about the plants than him. We saw another *Pachycereus*, and in the distance mountains. The nearest village is 10 miles from here. As they were winding into the valley, they saw other plants. *Agave macroacantha* is extremely variable in habitat - the ones in cultivation are selected dwarf clones. These ones were much more open and larger-growing too. Also growing here is *Agave titanota* which has white bone-like trims to the leaves. Again the ones we grow in cultivation are selected dwarf clones - these ones were a metre and a half across, and less attractive. A picture of a seedling showed that when young, it was much more like the plants we grow in cultivation. Growing by the side was *Mammillaria huitzilopochtli*, another plant that Lau discovered. These were dotted around all over the place and were growing in the shade which is surprising since other populations are found growing on rocks in full sun. These were growing just near the track, and there were bound to be more growing in the hillsides. They also found a plant that looks like an *Echeveria* but is actually a *Thompsonella*. You hardly ever see them in cultivation - they tend to get reddish/brownish spots on the leaves, even in habitat, so they are not popular.

Next was *Agave titanota* and this plant was much greener and there was nothing particularly attractive about it. It did have faint signs of variegation with a pale midrib. They got to an area where they could see *E. laui* which were visible across a river, when using a digital camera on full zoom. Surprisingly, all

the plants seemed to be spaced out and the same size. Eventually they were told that these were attempts to re-establish the plants and so had actually been planted out. They saw another *Thompsonella*. At this point, John Pilbeam had to give up, as the path got increasingly rocky, so they left him perched against a rock in the shade. The actual site was only 10 minutes away, with a river nearby which matched Lau's original description. They found a better looking *Agave titanota* and the brown foliage near it was *Selaginella* - the resurrection plant. Also from this area is *Agave potatorum*. It is much more widespread and they came across a young plant looking like it would in our greenhouse. They found more examples of *Agave titanota* but these were still not exciting plants. Then, 15 feet above them they saw the *Echeveria laui* plants, all different sizes and spacings. The pictures had to be taken with a zoom lens. *Mammillaria huitzilopochtli* was growing amongst them too.

Although there were clusters of plants, it tends not to offset and remains solitary. In places the plants were abundant - and there were also some young plants 1-2 inches across, along with tiny seedlings too. The species was doing really well, but the whole population was growing in an area no bigger than our meeting room. The plants were superb and well worth the effort to see them. Sometimes they were growing on the flat, but were usually on an incline. The old leaves are often retained and this can be a problem in a greenhouse with high humidity, but it's not a problem here. The other rosette in one of the pictures was a *Dyckia*, which is a bromeliad. Sadly it was not the right time of the year to see the *Echeverias* in flower. A shot showed the track they had come along, which was about a yard wide. We saw pictures of Jim and Mary and also Derek, and a close up of the plants. They are not that slow growing, but the leaves can't be propagated from. You can sometimes grow them from the small leaves on the flower stems, but this is with a very low success rate of 10% or less, while most other *Echeverias* are easy. We also saw a picture of their drunken escort. They turned round and on their way back, he noticed a group of young plants, it was almost like a little nursery of *Mammillaria huitzilopochtli* seedlings and also tiny *E. laui* seedlings. There was also some sort of fern-like plant together with *Selaginella*. This was a nice spot for seedlings. They found a very old plant of *M. huitzilopochtli* which was arching and hanging - it reminded him of a relative called *Mammillaria tlalocii* which was found 20 miles away and described as hanging like a smoking pipe - this looks similar.

They went back and recounted their findings to John. He was looking very rough and it was uphill all the way back to their car. David suggested he take his heart medication and was told that it was in the car! They found a Selaginella in a better spot and green because it was in full growth. We saw a shot looking back at the hillside, with the highlight being the dozens of Ceroid plants dotted around. We had overrun our time so it was time to end the talk.

Vinay Shah

Bookworm Corner

Welcome to the first Bookworm Corner for our branch newsletter! The aim of this column is to raise the awareness of our wonderful members, especially our newer members, to the joys of the branch library!! I am still not sure how I got talked into being the librarian at the December AGM. It is rather ironic, as when I was teenager I was really keen to be a librarian but somehow that career passed me by.....until now!

Firstly I would like to thank Peter Down for the kind donation of two hard copies of the new internet cacti and succulent journal 'The Cactus Explorer'. These are issues 'Number 1 - August 2011' and 'Number 2 - November 2011'. These are well worth having a read, call me old fashioned but I much prefer having a paper journal or book to read rather trying to read anything off the computer or a Kindle.

Each of the editions of 'The Cactus Explorer' include articles on recent new descriptions, greenhouse collections, book reviews as well as plenty of articles of field trips to discover cacti and succulents. Which brings me nicely to what I hope will be a regular and useful feature of the column: **'ENJOYED THE LECTURE? THEN ENJOY THE BOOK!'**

Cliff Thompson will be giving a presentation on Baja California this evening. My suggestions for worthwhile follow up reading includes the excellent article by Paul Klaassen 'Succulents of Isla de Cedros' in '**The Cactus Explorer: Number 2**'. This article covers a trip to this island off the coast of Baja California with detailed reference to Mammillaria, Dudleya and Agave in particular. Other species commented on include Echinocereus, Ferocactus, Opuntia and Pachycormus. Want to find out more from the January presentations? If you enjoyed David Neville's talk on *Echeveria laui* then read an article by John Pilbeam on 'Echeveria Laui is in Care' in '**The Cactus Explorer: Number 2**'. I hope to be able to recommend more books from the library in the next article, once I have had a better chance to study the contents of the boxes a bit more closely!

Sue Wilson

Next Month's Meeting

The March meeting will feature a talk by Hazel Taylor on the plants and lemurs of the interesting island of Madagascar.

The March Table Show will consist of the **Echinocactus** Group (cacti) and the **Agave** Group (succulents). Please note that you are allowed multiple entries in any of the classes.

The Echinocactus group includes *Echinocactus*, *Ferocactus*, *Homalocephala*, and *Leuchtenbergia*.

The Agave group includes Agave, Beaucarnea, Beschorneria, Calibanus, Dasylyrion, Dracaena, Furcraea, Hesperaloe, Manfreda, Nolina, Samuela and Yucca.

Forthcoming Events

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| Sat | 9 th | Feb | Isle of Wight | Plant Auction and Members' Slides |
| Sat | 16 th | Feb | Portsmouth | "Highlights of Arizona and Utah" – David Neville |
| Tue | 5 th | Mar | Southampton | "Plants & Lemurs of Madagascar" - Hazel Taylor |
| Sat | 9 th | Mar | Isle of Wight | Branch Quiz & Members' Talks |
| Mon | 11 th | Mar | Southampton | Branch Committee meeting (to be confirmed) |
| Sat | 16 th | Mar | Portsmouth | "Small Opuntiads" - Tony Roberts |
| Tue | 2 nd | Apr | Southampton | "Small Opuntiads" - Tony Roberts |
| Sat | 13 th | Apr | Isle of Wight | "Nature in Close-Up" - Colin Haygarth |
| Sat | 20 th | Apr | Portsmouth | Bring and Buy Auction |

Branch website: <http://www.southampton.bcsc.org.uk>