

British Cactus & Succulent Society

Southampton & District Branch Newsletter

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Editorial

Last month was our first meeting after 2 years of lockdown and we had a reasonable attendance of around 25 people, with a few new faces amongst the audience. A few members of the committee were missing but we hope to see them later in the year.

Announcements

Don't forget to **renew** your BCSS membership – this can be done using the form included with the CactusWorld Journals which were sent out to members in December. You can also renew using Paypal or a credit card at the BCSS website, at: <http://society.bcss.org.uk/index.php/subscriptions.html> (when renewing online you'll need to know your BCSS membership number, this is written on the address label of your Journal – David and I also have a list of membership numbers for current members).

Last Month's Meeting

Richard – our vice chairman - kicked off proceedings at the first post-pandemic meeting held by the branch. He mentioned that we were missing several committee members - Ivor was no longer with us, having passed away two years ago. We also lost Tony Grech – who used to get people to sign the attendance book on the front table – please do sign it when you have a moment – it's useful to have a record of how many people are at each meeting and it's also important from a safety point of view. Our chairman Adrian Bailey was not here which is why Richard was standing at the front. It was 2 years ago that we last met at the hall. Adrian had a medical condition and was also going to attend a procedure next week, and he hopes to be able to attend later in the year. Bruce Beckerleg – our plant sales manager has had a bad back for over a year – he can't sit down or drive, but he is OK standing up or lying

flat! Robin Caddy had been planning to come to the meeting, but a friend he had been in contact with had just caught covid, so he was isolating. David mentioned we have had 14-15 new members join over the last couple of years and some of them (Amelia, Kathryn, Andrew, Nicola) were here today. If you had not received an email from David about this meeting, please let him have your correct email address, so that you are kept aware of the latest developments at the branch.

Our committee has been depleted due to 2 people passing away, so we will need to hold a committee meeting soon to see how we organise ourselves in the future. We do need with running various aspects of the branch meeting, including setting up the hall and clearing up at the end. There was water lying on the path outside, which David hadn't noticed before. David mentioned that Ivor Biddlecombe had left his plants and books to the branch – his funeral was just after the start of the lockdown in 2020. We did collect his plants but quite a few went into the wheely bin due to pests. Glenn Finn has made an offer for the plants and a few of the more exceptional specimens will be auctioned. Ivor's books will be brought in for sale, and those which are collectors or sought-after books will be sold off at the National Show in September, where we might get more sensible prices for them.

Normally, we would prepare an annual branch programme and hand this out at the end of the preceding year – but we don't have one for this year. We will keep the website updated with news of what will happen at each branch meeting.

Normally at the monthly meetings we would have a table show, which would ensure we always have some mature plants to look at. However, participation in this was waning and we need to figure out what to do going forwards. The two people who supported the show the most were Bruce and Ivor and one of them is no longer with us, and the other can't attend. We also used to allow have a "Plants of Interest" section for people to bring in any plant that was doing something unusual - anything really - need volunteers - bring along 4 or 5 of your favourite plants - perhaps flowering for the first time - a new genus you had started growing - or

plants you are having a problem with. just one meeting a year. And it doesn't necessarily have to be a cactus or succulent.

The branch normally charges for teas and cakes served at the meeting, and we also charge sellers a commission of their plant's sale price. However the National Society has indicated that some branches have thousands in their bank accounts and this may cause a problem for the charitable status of the society - branches really don't need to hold more funds than are needed to run their operations. Since we are in the fortunate position of having sizeable reserves, we will no longer charge for teas.

David mentioned that people should renew their annual membership of the BCSS. Also, both our neighbouring branches (Portsmouth and Isle of Wight) have new venues for their monthly meetings – details are on the Zone 11 page which is linked from our website.

The National Show will be held later this year – it's the biggest and Cactus and Succulent event in the year and it will take place at the Newark County Showground, on Saturday 3rd September. It was supposed to have taken place in 2020 (it's held every four years) but the pandemic caused it to be delayed to this year. In past, we used to have overseas nurseries bringing in plants from the continent – but all that has changed after Brexit – phytosanitary passes would be needed to bring the plants to this country and also to take unsold plants back and this remains an ongoing issue.

David mentioned that in previous years we have held cultivation and propagation evenings and also a plant focus evening where we discuss plants from a couple of genera. Do people think we should hold these again? A majority of those present thought we should. We were due to discuss *Parodia/Notocactus* and *Agave* in 2020 when our meetings were cancelled and people thought those would still be good candidates. David mentioned that Peter Down had put a plant in the raffle - the name was *Agave x Romani* (also spelt *x Romanii*) and apparently this is a hybrid between *Agave filifera* and *Agave celsii albicans*.

David apologised for the lack of heating in the hall - something was wrong with the setup, and the sensor was not triggering the boiler to turn on.

There was a question from the audience about "goings on at the national level" – a number of the trustees including the chairman and vice chairman had resigned and new ones are due to be elected in April – Graham Charles is standing in for the time

being. David said he wasn't prepared to comment any further since he wasn't aware of the reasons behind the resignations.

There was time before the mid-meeting break so we decided to cover the topic of "how did everyone get on during the lockdown?" A few branches and organisations presented online talks via Zoom meetings – this included the National Society, the American Society, the German Society and also locally, Reading and Basingstoke and Portsmouth. At one event, there were over 500 attendees.

With heating costs due to go through the roof – will everyone start growing cold hardy plants? Ted Smith lives in Bitterne and he said it had been a very winter – his greenhouse is lined with bubble wrap and it had not gone below 4°C. Other agreed it had been very mild and some had left some of their succulent plants outdoors for most of the winter. We also discussed heat pumps. There are different types and some can be quite costly to install. They are basically electrically powered devices that can transfer heat from the air or the ground to heat a house but some of them can cost a lot to install. Miranda mentioned they had to have one fitted – it doesn't need to be installed under the floor – but they found they had to change some radiators and suffer additional costs. It might be fine as part of a new house but getting it fitted to an existing house made it a nightmare. Jane mentioned they have solar panels combined with rechargeable batteries and this was working out very well for her.

Sales of peat based composts to the public are due to cease in 2024. Even John Innes compost contains a proportion of peat and so will be affected. Jane mentioned she had planted some bedding plants in some peat-free compost and it had killed all of them – some of the composts are contaminated with herbicides and you won't know anything is wrong until a few weeks or months after using the compost. "Jack's Magic" is a peat-based compost and it is quite good – it used to be dark black in colour but seems to be a brown colour nowadays. It also seemed to be out of stock at some sellers. The purple bags of multi-purpose plants from B&Q were recommended and that still seems to contain peat, at present. Melcourt is a brand of peat-free compost and it used to be good but seems to be poorer now – one person mentioned it contained a lot of mushroom spores. David said he had got some Westland compost and it was lumpy and had grey mildew on it. Geoff said he used Westland's John Innes No.2 – he microwaves the compost to sterilise it, prior to use.

After the break we had short talks from three different speakers.

First was **Richard White**, who gave a talk titled “Sempervivum and Jovibarbas from Ivor Biddlecombe's collection.”. Richard mentioned that Ivor had a large collection of Sempervivums and he sadly passed away due to cancer, 2 years ago, just prior to the covid lockdown commencing. Sempervivums are not only cold hardy, they actually prefer to be grown outdoors. Other names for these plants include houseleeks, iceplants “hen and chickens” and also Jupiter’s beard. The name sempervivum is derived from the Latin for “always” and “living”.

Richard said he was not an expert with these plants, but he had been tasked with distributing Ivor’s collection – he and Ivor were both members of the Hampshire Alpine Garden Society and Ivor had thought the AGS members would appreciate the plants. We saw pictures of some Sempervivum plants for sale at one of the RHS shows – they vary nicely in colour and shape – these were in 3½ inch pots. The plants that Ivor grew were generally smaller in size. Sometimes, the colours of these plants on websites were quite bright and he wasn’t sure whether this was because of Photoshop or whether they were grown in quite bright conditions.

He mentioned that his interest in cacti and succulents started because an aunt and uncle of his in Portsmouth had *Sempervivum tectorum*, *Aloe aristata* and also an *Echinopsis* growing in their garden – perhaps the climate was mild enough even back then. He scrounged a few plants from his grandmother as well. In the 1970’s he came across a cactus show being held in Eastleigh by the Southampton branch - and that's when he joined the society. Ivor did a of work to host and organise the large shows and displays we put on, as well as run the table show at our monthly meetings. It’s quite bit of work to tally up all the 1sts, 2nds and 3rds and keep accurate records over the entire year.

These were pictures of some of Ivor’s plant and they were made available to the AGS members. Unlike the cacti and succulent plants in the greenhouses, these didn’t mind being neglected.

Richard mentioned they can attacked by wine weevil insects occasionally, but other than that, they are usually quite easy to look after. They flower in June and July. The flower stalk grows up from the middle of a rosette and it’s a terminally flowering plant – i.e. the rosette will die after flowering. However, by then baby offsets will have formed

around the base of the old plant and provide a means to the plant propagating itself.

There is another group of closely related plants called Jovibarba - and the difference is hard to see in these plants but it's more to do with the flowers. The flowers have 10-12 petals in Sempervivum and 5-7 petals in Jovibarba. Most sempervivums have pink flowers and Jovibarbas tend to have yellow flowers - but confusingly, some Sempervivums also have yellow flowers. The species *S. ciliosum* has a fringe of hairs on the edge of the leaves and some species can be very hairy indeed. Propagation is easy – you can just split them up when repotting. With a few types, the baby plants grow on long stems which hang over the edge of the pot - if that happens, you just need to cut these off and place them on top of some soil. The way the rosette propagates is also slightly different. *Jovibarba heuffelii* doesn’t really separate when it does try and split into two, so a knife may be needed. We saw some of Richard’s Sempervivums being grown in a raised bed, now those clumps are touching each other and will need to be separated.

So why grow Sempervivums? Well, they are quite hardy and also neat and tidy – most grow without taking up too much space. They don't need any space in your greenhouse. He showed an example of someone growing them in a wheelbarrow – you could move them to where the sun is. We also saw some grooving in a crevice bed at Wisley.

You sometimes come across Orostachys – which is loosely related but not hardy. It is also terminal flowering. Rosularia is another related species with flowers which look those of an look like an Echeveria - but it is a little harder to grow. With Sempervivums, there are over 7000 cultivars available, apparently - if you really like them – do visit the website maintained by the National Gardening Association of the USA, which hosts over 20.000 images :

<https://garden.org/plants/group/sempervivum/>

Their database can be searched through by various characteristics.

Richard mentioned that Sempervivums were planted on roofs of house to supposedly protect the houses from lightening - perhaps due to the points on the leaves. Donald Trump apparently cleared all the houseleeks from the roof of the White House, and we saw a picture of lightening hitting the white house! Sempervivums supposedly have a anti-inflammatory action similar to *Aloe vera* for treating skin conditions. They are also supposed to protect against witches!

Richard mentioned that his slides came from a newsletter that he wrote for the Hampshire AGS: <https://www.alpinegardensociety.net/local-groups/hampshire/> (in January 2022).

Our library has a book by Shirley Anne Bell which lists Sempervivums by leaf colour - wikipedia has some good material on Sempervivums and Jovibarbas and wikimedia has a list of sempervivum species. We finished this section of the talk with a image of *S. arachnoideum*.

Richard ended by holding up an Agave which had flowered in summer of 2020. The leaves had curved fringes. The plant was still alive but it has no growing point - since that forms the flower spike. So it can't grow but it also seems to be refusing to die! David thought it might be *A. parviflora* (Richard said no to that) or probably *A. polianthiflora*.

Next was **Tom Radford**. He mentioned that he had been experimenting with using artificial lighting to help winter-growing plants grow better. He uses suspended LED lighting and keeps the temperature at 9°C. One such group of plants is the Mesembs - many of them are winter growing. One species he has been growing a few of is *Conophytum*s.

We saw *Conophytum bilobum* dating from 2014. This would grow slowly and it was in a 2¾ inch pot. After using the lighting it was in a 4 inch pot in 2015 and in a 6 inch pan by 2021. He waters them all through winter until February and then keeps them dry until July/August. He also showed a light sensor which he uses to check the light intensity. *Conophytum* "Swirling Yellow" was a plant he got in 2018 and we saw it again in 2019 – in 2020 it was noticeably larger and the flowers were in better condition as well and it even produced seed pods later. Next was another *Conophytum* - one of the night flowering ones - the flowers come up and are closed in the day time - but they spread open at 10pm at night. It must attract some insect and is probably scented as well. He showed another plant where the centre had died out - and it had created a hole in the centre of the bowl. He pulled out the dead heads and did think of breaking up the plant, but he left it alone and within just a year it had grown enough new heads in the centre to cover up the hole.

Aloinopsis is a genus that doesn't seem to show much improvement in growth when using additional lighting, but their flowering is improved. It seems that you need 2-3 days of direct sunlight or lighting to encourage the flower buds to open. We saw *Aloinopsis rubrolineata* flowering last year – it has an orange midstripe to the yellow petals. Next was

Aloinopsis schoonesi – this plant formed buds in the past but they never opened or just half opened - but it flowered much better with the enhanced lighting.

Next was a south African bulb which is also a winter grower – *Massonia* – this was in a 3½ inch pot – the plants have wide leaves and flower from the centre of the plant. *Massonia citrina* was also in a 3½ inch pot – it flowers in late November or December and the flowers last a week or two.

Daubenya is related to *Massonia* - with some of the species, the flowers are similar to *Massonia* and with others they have a very different form. They also grow from little bulbs which die down in the summer and then grow in the winter.

Tom offered some tips on taking pictures of plants - some plants have a best side - he has an app on a phone which allows his camera to be controlled remotely, without having to be behind the lens. And he showed an example of how two plants of the same species in flower could be positioned to make them look like one larger plant.

Finally, *Rebutia* cv. 'Sunrise' was one of the free plants handed out by the branch to members in 2016 - it had grown very well for him - however, it had suffered with rot this winter so he will need to break up the plant and restart it.

The final speaker for the evening was **Ben Turner**. A few years ago, he had visited the Atlas Mountains, in Morocco, along with a group of botanists from the US, who were looking for daffodils.

They went into Marrakesh, and to the Jardin Majorelle - the Yves Saint Laurent Garden. This was an area established in 1923 by Jacques Majorelle, who decided to paint many of the walls in a vivid blue colour that he named "Majorelle blue". The gardens fell into disrepair but were acquired in the 1980s by Yves Saint Laurent and his companion Pierre Berge, who restored the gardens to what they are now. Morocco was a French colony so there is of course a lot of French influence.

We saw the main mansion. The garden is known for its collection of cacti – it's well maintained and tidy. Ben said there were a lot of cereoids with a backdrop of fig palm trees.

In the 1920s the house was created by Paul Sinoir, but when YSL acquired the premises in the 1980, he employed architect Bill Willis, interior designer Jacques Grange and garden designer Madison Cox to create what we see today. The buildings have quite a modern look combined with traditional

Moroccan architecture including arches. The cacti surround the mansion, and the blue colour is everywhere. Some plants were grown in raised beds and also in pots.

We saw a *Cleistocactus*, *Ferocactus* and a few big *Echinocactus*. There was also a *Furcraea* in the middle. *Cephalocereus senilis* (the old man cactus) originates from Mexico. There were also plants of *Epiphyllum* and *Hylocereus* growing up the palms. A plant of *Kalanchoe beharensis* was recognisable due to the felty leaves. There were some water features too, and fountains surrounded by cacti. There were some nice specimens of *Ferocactus*, some with fruit. Some of the plants were in yellow pots, which mixed well with the blue in the garden.

We saw *Aloe vera*, a gasteria and an epiphyllum in a pot. There was a plant of *Aloe marlothii*, with *Aloe arborescens* behind it. A small bird was drinking nectar from one of the aloes. We saw a nice cristate *Myrtillocactus geometrizans* – with a blue colour to the epidermis. None of the plants were labelled with names – but they had signboards with an outline of the plants where selected plants (and their origins) were named.

We saw an *Austrocylindropuntia* – and some large palms, and some more *Opuntias*. There were *Bougainvilleas* everywhere. N agave in flower might have been *Agave weberi*. We saw *Pachycereus pringlei* and another *Ferocactus* with fruits might have been *F. stansii* or *F. pilosus*. Ben mentioned there were barriers in place to prevent you getting too close to the plants. There were some interesting forms of *Echinocactus grusonii* – two large plants growing near each other might have been called Tweedledum and Tweedledee. Another *grusonii* was offsetting like anything – perhaps it had been damaged at some point. Ben said it can get very cold at the higher altitudes in the mountains but he wasn't sure about the townships. We saw a *Trichocereus* and another *Austrocylindropuntia* and a monstrose form of *Opuntia microdasys*. There was also a blue form of *Agave parryi* - he has one growing one outside for 9 years now. *Agave crysantha* might be hardier.

Vinay Shah

Next Month's Meeting

Our next meeting will be held on May 3rd and it will take the form of a Cultivation and Propagation evening. More details will be discussed at today's meeting!

Forthcoming Events

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| Sat 9 th Apr | Isle of Wight | Plants and Animals of the Western Cape (Hazel Taylor) |
| Sat 16 th Apr | Portsmouth | Plant Auction |
| Tue 3 rd May | Southampton | Cultivation & Propagation Workshop, with demos and discussions |
| Sat 14 th May | Isle of Wight | to be announced |
| Sat 21 st May | Portsmouth | Gasteria in habitat and culture (Tony Roberts) |

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

Facebook : <https://www.facebook.com/southamptonbcsc>