

British Cactus & Succulent Society

Southampton & District Branch Newsletter

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Editorial

Although the summer solstice and Wimbledon have both passed, it's hard to be sure that summer is here. We have of course had some warm days but on the whole temperatures have remained in check and it's also been quite humid.

In my conservatory, a couple of astrophytums flowered a week ago and these had very showy flowers. Some mammillarias and gymnocalyciums have also flowered in recent days as did an Aloe. The haworthias have also started to throw up their flower spikes. I did get round to some repotting – but it was limited only to plants which I had accidentally knocked onto the floor!

Announcements

The Branch Annual Dinner was held last Friday. Attendance was a little lower than usual, but I think everyone who came along had a good time.

Doug Donaldson's plants will be auctioned this coming Sunday, 10th July at High Wycombe. The list of 400 plants up for sale is available on the Internet at <http://zone8.bcsc.org.uk> and there is also a copy of the list on the front table. If you are interested in going along, please discuss with David.

Later this month, the branch will be taking part in displays at the **New Forest Show** and also the **Solent Fuchsia Society Show**. The organisers of the New Forest Show have cut down our allocation of tickets to just two per day – but it may be possible for the branch to buy additional tickets at a

discounted rate. If you want these – or can help at either event – please let David Neville know today.

For next month's meeting, John Pilbeam will be running a **Cultivation Masterclass**. He'll be relying on the audience to provide plants to talk about, so please bring along any plants that you need advice on, or are having trouble growing.

Last Month's Meeting

Plants of Interest

Bruce Beckerleg had brought along some plants of interest. The theme was “flowers” and the first plant was *Mammillaria guelzowiana* var. *splendens*. The flowers had closed up for the evening but this species is indeed known for the beauty of its flowers. Next was a *Lobivia/Echinopsis* hybrid “Violet Beauty”. This one is very floriferous, and those who helped on our stand at Sparsholt would have seen a good display of its spectacular flowers.

Lobivia janseniana was the first *Lobivia* he ever flowered. It is a good and reliable flowerer. *Acanthocalycium thionanthum* has unusual coloured flowers and is variable. Variety *glaucum* has little yellow flowers and *rubriflora* has red flowers. Unlike some other species, this plant keeps its flowers open into the afternoon and evenings.

The Island of Socotra

Our speaker for June was Bob Potter. He mentioned it had been quite a while since he had visited our Branch, and he remembered our old meeting hall at Bangor Road. He started his digital presentation with a video introduction to Socotra, with accompanying dramatic music by Ennio Morricone. The words on screen described it as “a succulent paradise”, “an island lost in time” and “incredible flora”, and we saw a preview of some of the plants and scenery from the island.

He mentioned that his trip to Socotra was born out of a conversation between himself and Leo Van der Hoeven when they met up at ELK, the large cactus event held every September in Belgium. Previously,

in the 1970s, he and his wife Beryl had lived in Yemen for nearly 4 years. Located near the capital Sana'a, he was involved in the construction of a road between two of the major towns. At that time, the country was divided into North and South Yemen and he was based in the North, while the South was under communist control, putting Socotra out of bounds. Even at that time, it was known that there were some wonderful plants out there, so it was very frustrating to be that close but yet unable to visit the island.

He showed a map, illustrating the position of the island – it was in the Indian Ocean, south of the Arabian Peninsula, and actually closer to the horn of Africa. This is also the area where Somali pirates are currently active. To get there, one needed to fly to Dubai and then to Sana'a, and from there to Aden and Mukalla which was the closest town on the mainland.

Leo was in the audience tonight and Bob mentioned that the pair of them had previously gone on a trip to Madagascar in 2006 and they were always looking for something interesting to see. With two of them going, that would be a good number for the trip. He had also met a chap in Costa Rica (Kevin) who was not a plantsman but keen to go, however three is an awkward number for a trip. They then learnt that Wiebe Bosma from Holland also wanted to go and this increased the party to 4 which was a good number, so they were all set.

The first sight we saw in Sana'a was the Taj Talha hotel, followed by views of the old town, the old alleyways and some donkeys. The Suq is the market and there were many different types of items for sale. Part of the market featured various objects made from brass. There were nice sights and people to see. The architecture was characterised by picturesque 7-8 storied mud brick buildings with lovely white window frames. We also saw cactus fruits for sale. A view over the old town showed it is a walled city (which has with 5 gates), and there are lots of minarets and mosques. A hill in the distance was Jebel Nuqum - during the civil war, the town was shelled from that hill.

Bob mentioned that not much had changed in 30 years, although one modern addition was the presence of TV satellite dishes. The main gate is called Bab Al-Yemen. The last time he had seen it, there were 6 human heads on the gate - beheadings used to be carried out in the square. This still happens from time to time, but they are more discreet now. The square is a meeting place, almost exclusively frequented by men. Wiebe was very

interested in Stapeliads so he was keen to look around for those. They had some spare time so after walking around the old city, they headed north west, to a few places he had visited before. At Wadi Daher, they came across some plants on a hill – this was *Caralluma cicatricosa*. The plant might look almost dead, but give it a drop of rain and it would come back to life. Bob showed a picture taken 30 years previously of the brown flower.

The Dar Al-Hajar is a famous sheikh's house built on a rock outcrop which is a "must see" place featured on all the tourist brochures. 30 years ago you could go and wander in for free, but now you have to pay. This was also a good location for plants - wadi means dried river bed. *Caralluma plicatiloba* looked dry and desiccated and almost dead, but given some water they would plump up and look great. The nicely marked flowers smell quite a bit - again the photo of the flowers was taken in the 1970s.

They saw Shibam which is a scenic area, and ten had lunch in a mufraj (sitting room). Kevin found a *Euphorbia fruticosa*, which was a good "spot", given that he was a non-plant person. There were some nice plants here - 9 inches high and clumps some 2-3 feet across. They got back to their hotel and the next day, they were off to Socotra.

After crossing the ocean, they got their first sight of the island. When you get out of the plane, it doesn't look too bad - the airport consisted of a modern building. The plane they were on was a Yemen Airlines 737. Bob mentioned that they now have no 737s because that plane came down, killing everyone on board except one young girl. Basically, the planes were not maintained properly and not allowed into European airspace - you are flying on a wing and a prayer. Back in 1976 it would have been even harder with DC3 or DC6s – at that time they had 4 planes but only one set of engines - so kept moving engines from one plane to another.

We were shown a detailed map of the island showing the contour lines – in due course they would visit the different ranges of hills in the centre of the island. We also saw that the capital Hadiboh was a small place to the east of the airport. As they set off from the airport, they could see some very nice plants of *Adenium socotranum* and *Euphorbia arbuscula*. Some of these were huge and looked fantastic. They were growing close to the ocean since the road ran along the coastline. *Dendrosicyos socotrana* is the cucumber tree and it was exciting to see some huge specimens of these growing on the rocks.

They arrived in Hadiboh and we saw their hotel, as well as the rather barren main street. Nothing at all goes on in the town, and it was a job to tell whether the buildings are half built or half falling down. The next day they set off, heading back towards the airport. He showed their route on a map, and they were due to climb to 1600m above sea level. Having to walk up this height in a day and get down again was a feat and quite hard going. Bushes of *Jatropha unicostata* were nothing special but it is a member of the Euphorbia family. It featured yellowish-golden flowers and some euphorbia-like fruits. *Aloe perryi* forms rosettes up to 2 feet across. *Euphorbia spiralis* is only found on this island and is very rare in cultivation. You always tend to take a picture of the first plant you find, since you never know if you'll come across any more, however just round the corner was the mother of all *Euphorbia spiralis* plants. It was a very attractive plant.

They found plants of *Adenium socotranum* with some vestiges of flowers on them, but this was not the main flowering season. *Dorstenia gigas* is an iconic plant and there were fantastic specimens growing out of the rocks, some up to 2 metres tall. They were fantastic shapes, with a rounded caudex at the base. A baby *Dendrosicyos* was 2 feet high – it was rare to see small ones here. The white blobs on a view of the mountain side were all plants of *Dorstenia gigas*. These were really big plants but many were inaccessible. There were some young plants too. There are plants of this in cultivation these days, but to see them in habitat was wonderful.

They got to the highest point and started wandering down to the point where they would pick up the cars and drive back. On the way down, they saw *Dracaena cinnabari* - the Dragon's Blood tree. These plants grow all over the island. From the underside they look like agaves on sticks. Some are quite tall and they look magnificent from a distance with their characteristic umbrella shape. On the way down, there were some more nice dracaenas. They also found a cissus of some type, and *Sterculia africana* with peeling bark, which is like our plane tree. They saw more *Dorstenia gigas*, growing on both faces of the mountain range.

The following day, they went on another excursion. They planned to walk to the top of another mountain range, however this was going to be a longer trek and they would need to camp out overnight. In response to a question from the audience about how they planned these excursions, Bob mentioned that they had guides and drivers with them and they knew roughly where they wanted to go, but the

routes up the mountain were best shown by the guides.

They had to take camping gear, food, water, and clothes with them. There was no way for vehicles to get up there, so they were using some pack camels. Kevin said "Why don't we get an extra one to carry people too?" Everyone agreed this was a good idea. We saw some pictures of everything unloaded from the cars, being readied to put onto the camel's backs.

They headed off, up to the summit. On the way, they found an *Oldenlandia* which was a succulent alpine plant, and a solanum, perhaps with a tuber underneath – the flower was typical of this family. The *Sterculias* were quite majestic trees. They came across a big bush of *Euphorbia schimperi*. Bob mentioned that when the camels climbed these rocky paths, they place their front feet on a step up and then place their back feet in exactly the same position. When you're on the back of a camel you're quite high off the ground and it takes some getting used to the motion. His camel stopped and needed a whack on the behind – it was quite unnerving when the guide let it run off on its own!

On the way up, they stopped for a break. Up near the top of the hill, they could make out a couple of big *Dorstenias*. Leo climbed up a steep cliff to get a picture of these, and he went there and back while the others had their cup of tea. Leo mentioned the plants were big, over a metre in size. The dracaenas were quite scenic. An unidentified tree excreted red sap when the bark was tapped. They found *Kalanchoe farinacea* growing quite well and in flower – these stood out a mile. Towards the top, they found *Crassula socialis*, which is the only *Crassula* found on the island. The plants were 6 inches high. He was later told that it is extremely rare.

Up at the highest point over the hill, there was a flat grassy plain, where they would stop. A shed in the distance turned out to be accommodation for goats – their shed was much smaller and not as nice! These were brick buildings with a wooden roof. They had another drink and had a quick look around before it got dark. It was chilly so a fleece was advisable. They were lucky to find *Duvaliandra dioscoridis* (previously *Caralluma*), which used to be common in cultivation. The stems are 4-angled and they found one in flower. Up on the hill there were lots of frankincense trees (*Boswellia*). They also found a small leaved aloe which might potentially be something new, along with *Euphorbia schimperi*.

For dinner, the guides cooked them a goat which proved to be too tough to eat and most of it got thrown on to the fire. It was pitch black in the shed, but they managed to have a game of cards by torchlight and his headlamp, which needed winding up every couple of minutes.

The next morning they prepared for the trip down, through a dry river bed. Going down a hill on a camel is much worse than going up! They came across a *Helichrysum* which had little white flowers and succulent leaves. In the valley they could see the *Dracaenas* again as well as *Kalanchoe farinacea* and *Aloe perryi*. The latter had a flower spike which was unusual at that time of the year. The *dracaenas* were very picturesque. Wiebe was excited to find a dried up *Echidnopsis*, although he was unsure of the species. *Kalanchoe robusta*, the largest of the *kalanchoes* is found here, and it can get to a metre high, along with *Adenium socotranum*. They also found the “daddy” of the *carallumas* on this island, *Caralluma socotranum*. There were no flowers on the plants at this time of the year, but the brilliant red flowers form in umbels at the top of the stem and produce a stunning sight.

They stopped for lunch at a nice little oasis. The camels were unloaded and they rested for a while. Looking at the hillsides, there were lots of *Adenium socotranum* plants. Although there are not myriads of plants here like in Madagascar, the big 5 – *Adenium socotranum*, *Dorstenia gigas*, *Dendrosicyos socotrana*, *Euphorbia arbuscula* and *Dracaena cinnabari* are the ones which will impress - the other plants are much smaller. There were a few aloes amongst the stones in the river bed, and they found more *Caralluma socotranum* and *Edithcolia grandis*. There were some fantastic clumps here. They found one plant with long slender seed horns, but unfortunately this was not ripe.

Bones lying on the ground suggested something had died from a lack of water - it was probably a cow. There were lovely little *Adeniums* growing here. Also they found huge clumps of *Edithcolia grandis*, over a metre across. It is not an easy plant to grow, and he was pleased to have found one on our sales table tonight. It has a fantastic star-shaped flower. As they continued down to where they would pick up the car, there were more plants of *Adenium socotranum*, wedged into the rocks in amazing ways. These were beautiful plants, and he almost felt like giving some of them a cuddle. One notable plant had split into two at the base and was now growing twin stems.

Eventually they were going to cross the Diksam plateau and the landscape here was like a lunar scene with black basalt rocks. It was a good place to see more *Dracaenas*. They again found *Caralluma socotranum*. We saw pictures of their young guide Atum preparing their dinner, and also two of their drivers. It was funny how the preparation of food suddenly attracted about 40 people from the bush, who all wanted to share dinner.

Now they crossed the Diksam plateau. There were lots of *Dracaena cinnabari* growing here. There was knobbly bark on one of the trees. The rocks here seemed to be of volcanic origin and also contained lots of holes, which was convenient for some of the plants. Wiebe found *Echidnopsis socotrana* but there were no flowers to verify this. The plants tended to grow in areas with protection from the full sun. The whole village turned out and he went through his stock of *biros*.

Back to their hotel in Hadiboh, they were in the shadow of a minaret. Because of the noise from the mosques, there was no need for an alarm clock. We saw a few pictures taken around the town, including the local mechanic and a store selling general supplies. There was nothing much to buy apart from Chinese junk. The fish market was interesting – being an island, fish is a staple diet here. However the smell was really strong. There were no women doing the shopping – it was just men. Because of the past history of the island, there were some old Russian tanks dotted along the coastline.

They now headed westwards to Qalansiyah. There was a fabulous beach here, with no one to bother you at all. They found a few plants here. *Edithcolia grandis* was widespread. He heard a scuttling sound behind him and did a runner when he realised the noise was caused by a large spider. A mother and baby *Adenium* were growing near each other. Bob mentioned their guide was around 18 years old - when asked how old the plants were, no one really knew. He told Atum that he could come along and measure these every year, and eventually write a paper and become world famous – but Atum didn't seem that interested.

Cissus hamaderohensis sprawls around. Down at the beach the setting sun brought out the rocks in a nice golden colour. They pitched their tents there. A picture of the town showed it was smaller and in worse state than Hadiboh. The reason for coming here was that 80 miles off this part of the coast is the small island of Abd al Kuri - where *Euphorbia abdelkuri* is found. They were thinking of getting a boat across, however, only one man on the island

had a boat big enough to do the journey. They spent an hour negotiating the price to get them to the island. Starting off at well over \$1000, they got it to half that, and were just about ready to agree when the man said he would need more money for a 2nd boat (in case the first sank) and also additional money for a guard against the pirates and for a guide. In the end, they did not go. Another problem was that between the four of them, they did not have that much cash on them - and credit cards aren't much use in places like this. If there was a next time they'd get a dhow from Mukalla and sail across on a 5 day trip.

They headed back east and explored a new part of the island. It was very dry here and the shrubs and a desiccated *Euphorbia spiralis* looked quite sad, compared to others seen earlier in the trip. *Aloe perryi* seemed to be doing OK. They had some GPS references from a couple of Czechs who had written an article for the American Journal, having found a new species, *Socotrella dolichocnema* in this area. He realised that he had seen the view before in a picture published in the American journal and they realised they were standing at the same spot where the Czechs must have been, several years previously. They had a quick look around and found a few things - *Echidnopsis* growing amongst the rocks were in flower here and had nice yellow flowers. Once you see one, you start seeing quite a lot of them. A bronze hued *Aloe perryi* was superficially the same as the ones they had seen before, but the bronze cast to the leaves meant it had a new name - *Aloe jawiyon*. Another plant which was probably an alpine looked just like *Anacampseros alstonii* but of course that would not occur here. It grew in the same manner and there were little clumps of it everywhere.

They camped here and resumed looking for the *Socotrella*. They turned rocks over and found loads of *Echidnopsis* stems under the shelter provided by these rocks. Eventually - eureka! Wiebe found the *Socotrella dolichocnema*. To be honest, it was a manky piece of stapeliad. There wasn't much of it around and it was growing under and amongst the rocks, just like the *Echidnopsis*. Pictures in the 2006 American journal showed that it had a little yellow flower. It was not a striking looking plant, but when you are one of the few people on the planet to have seen this plant, it does feel special.

On the way back to Hadiboh, they encountered some road construction. His instincts kicked in and he helped mix some concrete for them. His assessment was the wall and concrete won't be there very long. Next we saw a picture of the only women

they ever saw in Hadiboh - a group of 5, dressed from head to toe in black. Next morning, they had breakfast at the cafe down at the end of the street. Dinner was fish with some rice and some slop, and there was also a goat there to clean up after you.

They now headed eastwards. As before, they drove the first part and walked the final piece. As they headed for the Homhil plateau, they passed areas where there was lots of wind-blown sand from the beaches. There were plants of *Adenium socotranum* here but apart from sheltered plants, they had almost no leaves on top, due to being blasted by the sand. There were some nice *Sterculias* along with Myrrh (*Commiphora*) trees and *Dendrosicyos socotrana*.

The Homhil plateau was announced by a sign, which was a rarity. They first saw *Euphorbia arbuscula* and *Dracaena cinnabari* and also some tiny *Adenium socotranum*s - these looked very stunted and were quite fat. *Euphorbia arbuscula* formed huge trees and the *Dracaenas* were nice shapes. As the sun started to set, it lit up the plants with a bronze cast. They stayed in a three sided shed. There was a huge hill in front of them, and they went up the hill and looked down. They found *Caralluma socotranum* and also *Edithcolia grandis*, so these are found across the island. We saw a view over the plain. The *Euphorbia spiralis* here were not looking too well. There was also the thinner stemmed *Euphorbia schimperii* and some baby adeniums. *Kalanchoe rotundifolia* had a different flower from the other kalanchoes they had seen earlier. *Boswellia nana* is a tree with small stunted growth and it was only 12-13 inches long and lying prostrate to the ground. It is only found here. We saw a baby *Dracaena cinnabari* with just a single stem. A ceropegia proved to have a lovely flower when Wiebe flowered it back in Holland. *Kalanchoe robusta* formed huge plants here.

They returned to Hadiboh for their last night and headed to the airport the next day for the trip home. Back in Sana'a, they heard sounds from the mosque as the evening approached. With the sun setting, the lights come on in the old part of the town, covering it in an eerie glow. The final picture showed the party of four enjoying their last dinner of the trip.

Bob answered a few questions at the end, including how much the trip cost. In a place like this, it is best to arrange everything through a travel company who provided the guides, drivers and the flights and also the food and camping gear. The total came to about £2000 each. Once you are on Socotra, there isn't much else to spend your money on!

Vinay Shah

Table Show Results

There were 24 entries in the June table show.

	Cacti – Parodia	Succulents – Crassula
Open	(1) A Sheader Notocactus sp.	(1) B Beckerleg Graptopetalum suaveolens
	(2) A Sheader Notocactus graessneri	(2) J Roskilly Adromischus cooperi
	(3) T Grech Parodia culpinensis	(3) -
Intermediate	(1) T Smith Parodia warasii	(1) B Beckerleg Crassula susannae
	(2) B Beckerleg Parodia tarabucina	(2) J Roskilly Crassula ausensis ssp. titanopsis
	(3) A Sheader Notocactus schlosseri	(3) T Smith Gasteraloe H907

Ivor Biddlecombe

Branch Committee Meeting

A Branch committee meeting was held on 16th May.

The branch displays at Sparsholt and Hilliers were discussed. Both events had attracted good interest from the public and we achieved a reasonable level of plant sales.

Recent meetings were discussed. The Branch's slide projector had played up at the May meeting and David wondered whether it needed replacing. Although speakers are tending to give more digital talks these days, it is still necessary for us to have a decent quality traditional projector. Even a second hand unit would be fine as long as it was in good working condition.

The branch dinner was due to be held on 1st July. David had got some names already and would remind people at the June meeting to let him know if they planned to attend.

Seating for the Zone Quiz which we will host in October was discussed briefly. It is quite a challenge to have each of the teams being to able to see other and the audience as well as a projector screen. Although we had scheduled a Table Show during the evening of the Quiz, it was agreed that we would not have the space, so the October table show will be cancelled.

A couple of branch members had asked some of the committee whether it was possible for the branch to organise a trip to Europe, to visit Continental nurseries. This is a pretty big undertaking which needs a lot of planning and we would need someone who had done this sort of thing before. David said that when he visited Europe to buy plants, he visits wholesale nurseries, not retail. A trip to Specks is essential but it would add a lot of distance to the overall trip. For now, the best option remains to tag along on a trip organised by one of the other branches around the country.

Vinay Shah

Next Month's Meeting

Our next meeting will be held on the 2nd of August, and will feature John Pilbeam, who will be holding a cultivation masterclass. Please bring along your plants – including problem cases – and John will provide advice on how best to look after those plants.

Note that John runs a mail-order nursery – and he would probably be willing to bring along any plants you wish to purchase. So take a look at www.cactus-mall.com/connoisseurs-cacti/index.html and get in touch with John if you are interested in buying any of his plants.

The August Table Show will consist of the **Mammillaria** group (cacti) and the **Euphorbia** group (succulents). Please note that members can submit more than one entry in any of the classes, and that points will be earned for each placed entry.

The **Mammillaria** group contains 13 genera, including *Mammillaria*, *Bartschella*, *Cochemiea*, *Dolichothele*, *Mamilloopsis*, *Mammillyodia* and *Solisia*.

The **Euphorbia** group only contains *Euphorbia*.

A reminder for committee members that a committee meeting will be held at the usual venue on 18th July.

Forthcoming Events

Sat	9 th	Jul	Isle of Wight	to be confirmed - Paul Klaassen
Sat	16 th	Jul	Portsmouth	"What I did Last Winter" - Paul Klaassen
Mon	18 th	Jul	Southampton	Branch Committee Meeting
Tue	26 st	Jul-	New Forest	Display / Plant Sales @ New Forest Show, Brockenhurst
Thu	28 th			
Sat	30 th	Jul	Titchfield	Display / Plant Sales @ Solent Fuchsia Society Show, Titchfield
Tue	2 nd	Aug	Southampton	Cultivation Masterclass - John Pilbeam
Sat	13 th	Aug	Isle of Wight	Open Evening at Robin Goodredge's
Sat	16 th	Aug	Portsmouth	No meeting
Tue	6 th	Sep	Southampton	Agaves Through the Ages - Colin Walker
Sat	10 th	Sep	Romsey	Display / Plant Sales @ Romsey Show
Sat	10 th	Sep	Isle of Wight	Fossils - Mrs Simpson
Sat	17 th	Sep	Portsmouth	USA 2011 - Ian Woolnough

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