

M**MANCHESTER BRANCH
NEWSLETTER APRIL 1998**

Easter has been and gone, the gardens are in full growth and we have enjoyed a grand holiday in Malta. I hope you enjoyed the Bank Holiday weekend in a fruitful way. I expect most or all of your plants have now woken to the extended daylight hours and have made known they would like a drink. Our fellow brethren in the north east will just be daring to contemplate giving their plants some water by now. That was what Ray Stephenson told me when he looked round my collection after the March meeting.

I am pleased to be able to add some donated information to this newsletter. Ivor Crook has provided an article for the "Plants I like to grow" section. Thank you, Ivor! Come on the rest of you and follow suit.

PERSONALITY PORTRAIT

To follow the innovation started last month I am going to give you a brief look into my time in the hobby.

I was first introduced to the hobby when I made one of the occasional visits to my mother's sister. She lived in the sleepy village of Formby (at least it was in the period after the last

war). For me it was always a long journey by slow train to this north west corner from our home in the East Midlands near Northampton. She didn't have a large garden but it was always crammed with flowers. The conservatory at the back of the house was likewise full to overflowing. In one half were these strange looking plants covered with spines and some Gasterias, Haworthias and Aloes though I had no idea at the time what they were called.

Fascination took over and at the age of 11/12 she considered I was old enough to be trusted. As long as I promised to tend them properly I could take some plants and offsets home. I was also given strict instructions about their welfare. Clay pots and a specific soil mix were amongst them:

Kettering loam

Sharp sand

Broken brick

Charcoal

Peat.....in their various amounts.

My mother generously gave me a corner in her greenhouse and so began my interest which was fanned by instant success. The cuttings all took root (well they would considering how easy the plants were but I didn't realise that at the time), flowers came in abundance and they were all quite hardy being capable of withstanding the winter ravages under the protection of glass. Winter losses were unknown

among those plants. Unlike the north west where the Pennines and the close proximity of the sea influences the strength of winter cold, Northants doesn't enjoy such luxuries. Many was the morning when I would wake to perfect frost patterns on the bedroom window and winter was never done till the March snows had cleared.

Of the young Society I knew naught. Yet less than 10 miles in all directions meetings were taking place. Kettering 7 miles to the north, Northampton 8 miles to the west and Rushden (a part of the Northamptonshire branch) 6 miles east. A brother of my friend round the corner also grew a few plants and we did some exchanges. The only plant I actually bought was a small seedling of *Notocactus leninghausii*. This was at the town carnival where I discovered a gentleman with a whole array of plants in the grand marquee. Many years later I discovered he was one of the foremost nurserymen of the era.

The age of eighteen loomed and all members of the sixth form were expected to go on to college at least but preferably University. Career guidance? Non existent. I chose a career in teaching (though I still don't know why) and came north to Middleton. My mother said she would care for the orphaned plants..... it was only for two years (well that's what we

all thought). The course was successfully completed, jobs were more plentiful in the industrial north and most importantly love had blossomed so I never returned to the plants. I had nowhere to house them up here as I was in lodgings so they remained at home where they were beginning to outgrow their space so mother decided to get rid of those that were too big.

A couple of years went by and my intended discovered a strange plant with a bluish, five ribbed body covered in minute white spots. Not a spine in sight, an ideal windowsill plant. Later it proved to have large, silky, pale yellow flowers. Can you guess what it was? Answer at the end of the article. It came from a market stall in Rochdale owned by what is now a large garden centre, Gordon Riggs. In those days he had a couple of rickety greenhouses. The flame had been fanned but it didn't burst forth properly for another couple of years when we had a house with a garden where I could erect a greenhouse. What was left of my collection travelled north in the van of a driver who had been coerced to make a detour on his way north after making deliveries down south.

Shortly after this we moved into a house of our own so the 8 x 6 wooden greenhouse moved to a permanent site

and the plants began to flourish. Regular visits were made to the Gordon Rigg empire in Todmorden. It wasn't easy transporting a box of plants on a Honda 50 borrowed from my father-in-law but it was accomplished none-the-less. There were always interesting plants to be acquired which had originated from the Dutch nurseries. I could easily spend hours browsing amongst the offerings at 1/6, 2/- and 2/6. So the collection grew.

Then came the introduction to the Society. I was looking through the book section at Boot's in Manchester where I chanced upon the introductory booklet produced by the NCSS designed to encourage people into the fast growing hobby. Off went the application form to the legendary Winnie Dunn, then Membership Secretary of the Society that had just undergone a revolution where the long serving committee members were ousted in a not quite bloodless coup. The Society was at the beginning of its boom years. I didn't have transport of my own in those days so I couldn't travel to the meetings at St. Thomas's in Salford but even then my name (being unusual) had been noted by the secretary, Mrs. Kidd.

As soon as I had gained my licence and a second hand car I started to travel the slippery slope down into complete cactus mania and attended meetings. The

company was convivial, the plants alluring and I was hooked properly this time. By 1970 I was a committee member along with another new joiner, Neville Crane, who became a good friend and fellow traveller to exotic nurseries like Jumanery and the much more accessible Tom Blackburn's at Woodplumpton near Preston. Sadly various matters have caused him to forsake the hobby but in its heyday his collection of Mammillarias was a picture to behold.

I have served on both Branch Committee from that time and also in various capacities for the National Committee of the Society.

From an interest that was almost 100% cactus, the influence of people like Colin Partington, Fred Prosser, Harold Gaulton, Frank Horwood and in later years Keith Grantham, Tom Jenkins and Alan Hart has led me into an appreciation of the other succulents. Consequently my interest in the two areas is equal though the collection is probably 60/40 in favour of cacti in the plants grown. From a simple 8 x 6 the housing has evolved and changed many times due to house moving. Now there is a 12 x 6 warm house for the heat loving plants, an 8 x 6 for the mesembs plus a few others and two others for the more general collection, a 10 x 8 and a 13 x 10. Why not one

large greenhouse? Come and visit the collection and you will understand.

Answer to the puzzle: *Astrophytum myriostigma*.

Next month's subject is one of our younger members, Chris Leather.

PLANTS I LIKE TO GROW

Contributed by Dr. Ivor Crook.

LITHOPS DOROTHEAE.

I would find it difficult to name a favourite plant but this one would certainly rank high in my final short list. My collection currently houses two pots of 6 month old seedlings and two specimens, C124 and C300. The habitat location of both these colonies is listed as 15km north of Pofadder in the Northern Cape Province of South Africa just south of the Orange River. However, I never fail to be fascinated by the variety of colouring and window size in photographs and specimens in other people's collections. Des Cole's book shows two specimens. In one the window occupies about 80% and in the other it occupies only about 15% of the upper surface of the plant. Prof. Nel's book shows what looks like a single plant with at least 15 heads and great diversity of window size on different heads of the same plant. Starkly

contrasting colours between the window and the rest of the plant are enhanced by variable small islands within the windows. For me though, the most interesting features are the red lines or rubrications that lie within the windows.

Last Spring as I eagerly awaited the emergence of a new set of leaves from the older, slightly sun scorched set, I noted that there were no red lines in the windows of the new leaves. Where had they gone I wondered? As Spring turned to Summer the red lines appeared and deepened in colour as the plants enjoyed daily sunbathing in my front porch. In correspondence with an experienced Mesemb grower in South London I mentioned my observations on this plant but he had never noted this phenomenon before. In early March this year I visited Ian Robinson's collection, 1,000 feet up the Welsh mountains just outside Wrexham. His specimens were just beginning to show their new leaves and there, sitting happily on the new growth were several bold red lines. With their advantage over me of latitude and altitude do these people's plants enjoy more ultraviolet light to bring out the rubrications? As Spring arrived I eagerly awaited the first glimpse of the new leaves on my own plants. Both plants this year show signs of rubrication on the new growth but not nearly as much as on the

previous year's leaves. Does the rubrication on the new growth increase with the maturity of the plant or have we just had a particularly sunny winter? If anyone has any thoughts on these observations please share them with me.

(Any offers from any of you Lithops growers? Ed.)

More from Ivor next month about seed growing.

APRIL SPEAKER

After last year's visit to talk about Tephrocactus and his obvious enthusiasm about the plants it comes as no surprise that he was invited back again to impart his knowledge about Gymnocalyciums. The subject matter is one of the requests Brendan received from a branch member for a particular subject. Graham has been growing these plants for many years now. Visits to habitat have given him a clear insight into the best way to grow them, their variability and an obvious love of the genus.

FORTHCOMING EVENTS

Please remember the visit to John Henshaw's nursery on Saturday May 23rd from 18.30. Those of you who

went last year will recollect what a good time was had by all. John has often stood in and given us a talk at very short notice. Here's a chance to say "Thank you" to him in a positive way. If you are unsure of the location, lack transport facilities or are just a little shy of coming alone please do approach a committee member and ask. We will be delighted to help. If transport is your main worry then someone will be only too delighted to offer you some assistance.

BRANCH SHOW

The schedule for this event will soon be available. We would welcome new faces at this enjoyable event. Start talking to your plants to encourage them to look in their prime. Don't make the oft quoted mistake of thinking your plants are not worthy of the show bench as this is a fallacy.

IS WINTER BAD IN BRITAIN?

A quote from a letter from a friend of mine in Malta.

"Here the weather continued to be wetter than usual. On the last Sunday of January we had a freak hail storm. It was rainy all day, but in the afternoon it got colder and in certain areas they had this freak hail storm that lasted three hours. In some parts

the hail was one metre deep and everything was white as if covered with snow. The weight of the hail wrecked several greenhouses. The ice had to be removed manually from the flat roofs because the weight was too much. In one particular area the hail storm was followed by heavy rain, but the drains were still blocked with the unmelted ice, so these localities were flooded. Certain roads were turned into raging rivers but there was only one fatality.

Quite lucky this year aren't we?

MAY MEETING

Dr Keith Mortimer, past Society chairman. He is one of the few remaining people who were at the helm of the "TCP enthusiasm". For those of you who do not understand this jargon it was quoted by a long standing cactus purist in the 60's who reckoned these new plants resembled Turnips, Carrots, and Parsnips. He was most disparaging about the plants we call Caudiciforms nowadays.

VOTING SLIPS

Have you exercised your democratic right to cast your vote for the important post of Society Vice Chairman? Remember you can either

send your vote to the Society Secretary whose address is on the voting form or you can hand it to me in a sealed envelope with the word BALLOT written in the top left hand corner of the envelope. I will see that it arrives in the correct hands for counting at the AGM on Saturday 25th April.

HAVE YOU NOTICED

In correspondence with different people from time to time I am asked questions to which I don't always have the answer. Can you cast any light on the matter?

Do you grow any *Soehrensias*? If so have you flowered them? I am led to believe they need plenty of good light to bring flowers to fruition. What is your experience?

A recent enquiry is to do with the flowering time of *Weingartias*. My correspondent has been given information that suggests the main flowering period for them in cultivation is September. This does not accord with my experiences. When do your *Weingartias* bloom?

A plea for information about an *Echinopsis* bearing the collection number AA90. Is there anyone with such a plant?

Replies to the Editor, Peter Bint.