

MANCHESTER BRANCH
NEWSLETTER
MAY/JUNE 1998

Into print once again after failing with the inadequate time last month... my apologies but there were not enough hours in the day. Anyway we'll make up by trying to make this copy bigger, contributors willing. By now some of you will have enjoyed another visit to John Henshaw's nursery, which I understand was well attended. Hopefully your greenhouses, conservatories or windowsills are just that wee bit fuller than they were at the beginning of May. Anyway let's move on to our most recent contributor.

PERSONALITY PORTRAIT

This month we meet one of our younger members, Chris Leather, who has been in our midst for several years now, always with the backing of parents and grandparents.

Peter has asked me to write about my introduction to Cacti and Succulents. The story starts in 1988 when I was 13 years old.

My first cactus was *Chamaecereus silvestrii* and it lived in a terra-cotta bowl with about a dozen *Bryophyllums* (I think). The *Bryophyllums* had thin woody stems and little plantlets that grew on the edges of the leaves. The cactus ended up rotting away because there was no drainage but the succulents seemed to survive. They were eventually potted into individual pots and lived on the windowsill in the spare bedroom. They tended to grow about 8 inches tall and lose their lower leaves. I can remember planting one

in a 2kg. Stork margarine tub and it eventually grew to be about 7 feet tall. I was pleasantly surprised one day to see it had flowers on it.

For our summer holiday in 1989 we went to Grasmere in the Lake District. We visited a Garden Centre one day and I bought a small cactus. This was a *Cleistocactus*. My sister bought a *Euphorbia* (Crown of Thorns). I still have both plants. The *Euphorbia* lives in my bedroom and always has small red flowers on it. The *Cleistocactus* has grown to about 12 inches tall.

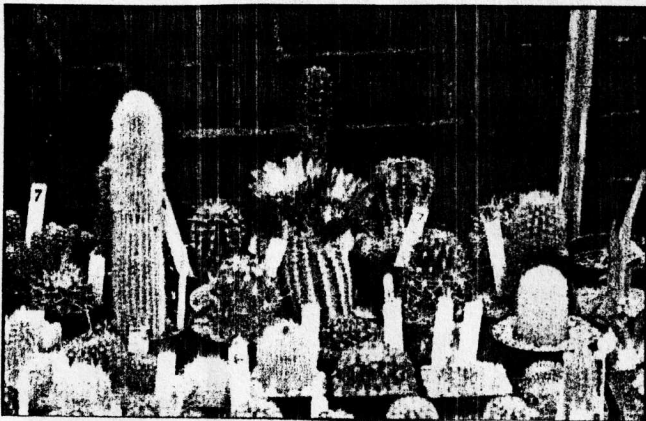
My Grandparents gave me a book on house plants for my birthday that year and it contained several pages on cacti and succulents. At this time I made several visits to a small gift shop in Darwen that had cacti for sale. I bought *Mammillaria glassii*, *Rebutia violaciflora*, *Thelocactus bicolor*, *Mammillaria elongata* and *Mammillaria discolor*. I still have the latter and it flowered last year. Slowly the number of plants increased and soon the whole windowsill in the spare bedroom was full of cacti. I borrowed several books from the local Library and one had the address of the Society in it. My first two journals (March and June '91) arrived together and I can quite clearly remember reading them while the front room was being decorated and dad was watching cricket on TV. The March Newsletter had a report on a *Mammillaria* and a Mesemb Show as well as an article about Polythene tunnels amongst others.

I went with my dad to the June 1992 meeting which was held at the Sutherland Community Centre, Heywood. Philip Downs gave a talk about a visit to Malawi in Africa.

Obviously I soon acquired quite a number of plants and the spare bedroom became a battle zone between my plants and the washing, as Mum used the room to dry clothes.

The front of our house faces south-east so, in an attempt to give them more light, I would move them from the front of the house to the back of the house in the afternoon so that they would get the sun as it set in the evening.

It was my 18th birthday in 1993 and I was told I could have a small greenhouse. We visited B&Q in Bolton and picked a 6' x 4' aluminium greenhouse. It was delivered a few days later along with a 6' x 6' base. It had to go back though because it was impossible to assemble the greenhouse ~ there were no holes for the screws! We went to a proper greenhouse firm and we soon had it assembled in the back garden.



I got a paraffin heater to keep the greenhouse warm but in an effort to keep my plants warmer in very cold weather I obtained some polystyrene boxes from the Fish and Chip shop where I work. I got eight and after removing the bits of fish I left them in the garden with some washing up liquid on them to wash in the rain. There was a bit of a smell but that was OK as long as the plants were kept

warm. They were quite deep (about 4 inches) and the size of a normal plastic tray. This was fine until the weather started getting warmer around March and April as I would leave the door open. Imagine my horror when I found the neighbour's cat balanced on the boxes between the *Gymnocalyciums* and *Lithops*!

The plants seemed to like it much better in the greenhouse as they were getting much more light. Several plants flowered the following year: *Rebutias*, *Echinocereus gentryi*, a *Frailea*, an *Echinopsis*, *Aloe*, *Lithops*, *Gymnocalyciums* and *Notocactus*.

The only problem was that I now had an empty window sill in my bedroom. So I started growing seeds. My first attempt was quite successful and I managed to get some nice plants. The packet of seed was from a Garden Centre and there seemed to be three lots of plants in the packet. One group was a plant from *Ferocactus* but the other two I am uncertain of, though one of them flowered last year with a large yellow blooms.

Later attempts at seed growing were less successful but I have kept going and I am getting better. I got quite a few seeds from my own plants and I have a nice tray of *Frailea aurea* and some *Lithops*.

My favourite plants are *Fraileas* and *Gymnocalyciums*.

Thank you very much Chris for an enlightening insight into your involvement with the hobby. Come on all you people who have never tried seed growing ~ give it a go on that empty windowsill in your bedroom! What a luxury!!!

THE LIBRARY

Harry Mak has started doing an excellent job with the library and is bothered by the absence of a number of books. I know they were announced in April but here once again is the list of those books he cannot find:

Cactaceae ~ Britton & Rose Vol. 1 & 2
Succulents ~ Illustrated Encyclopaedia of
Cacti from seed ~ E. Lamb
Grow Cacti ~ C. Marsden
Cacti ~ Backeberg (German Edition)
Echeveria ~ E. Walther
Cacti & Succulents for the amateur ~ Glass & Foster
Cacti & Succulents ~ A. J. Huxley
Cacti & Other Succulents ~ W. Shewell-Cooper
Decorative Cacti & Other Succulents ~ R. Subik
Encyclopaedia of Cacti
Fine Flowered Cacti ~ F. R. McQuown

If you have any of these volumes would you please let Harry know as soon as possible. He is also looking into the cost of borrowing books because some of the books are irreplaceable due to being out of print or because their value has rocketed. To safeguard the Library as a whole we are seeking to house them in a lock up cupboard very soon indeed.

GROWING FROM SEED BY IVOR CROOK

Following Chris' remarks about his attempts at seed growing it is apposite to have an article from Ivor on that very subject...over to you Ivor.

Whenever I've grown plants in the past, either bedding plants, vegetables, cycads, or trees for bonsai, growing them from seed has always been of great interest and enjoyment. So when I was introduced to the Cactus and Succulent hobby some two and a half years ago it was only a matter of time before growing succulents from seed came high on my agenda. Preliminary attempts were based on my early reading from **Franz Buxbaum's book 'Cactus Culture'**. Some modification of the detail was required as earthen pans and wooden boxes are no longer considered the leading edge in seed raising containers but large plastic trays seem to fit the bill well.

I followed the instructions of filling the well-scrubbed containers with soil and divided the container into small sections using six inch long plant labels laid edge down and half embedded in the soil. Early sowings met with mixed results, some complete failures and some sections producing one or two plants and a lot of confusion as seeds had obviously bounced over the dividers and were appearing everywhere except where they should. After over-wintering my first two trays of seed I was left with **Buxbaum's Dilemma** - 'to prick out or not'. As my seedlings were nine months old and fifteen Gibbaeum seedlings in a full size seed tray was beginning to seem like a very inefficient use of greenhouse space I decided to transplant. Thankfully everything survived. I was however amazed by the length of root most plants had generated compared to their body size. I had kept the tray quite dry over winter and finger nail sized plants had roots running the whole length of the tray.

My current method of raising seed is a hybrid of ideas from several sources. Take fifteen two and three quarter inch square plastic pots, (they happen to fit neatly in three rows of five in a seed tray). Cover the bottom of the pots with gravel, no more than a quarter of an inch in depth. Fill to about half to three quarters of an inch of the top of the pot with soil. I use a mixture of **two parts John Innes seed compost to one part horticultural sand** (as sold by my local B&Q). Water **lightly** and at this point. I often leave them to stand in a dry place for **two or three days after watering**. Cover the top of each pot with a piece of cling film about half as big again as the top of the pot and fold down the overlap evenly around the pot. I usually hold the cling film down with two elastic bands. Place two paper towels on the plate in the microwave and place five covered pots in the microwave. **Cook for two to three minutes** depending on the size and type of pots used. This kills everything in the soil. Cook the rest of the pots in batches of five. If the soil is too wet the film blows upwards and may burst. Leave to cool overnight.

Remove the elastic bands and slowly peel back the cling film being careful not to touch the underside of the film. Sow the seeds directly onto the compost and apply one squirt of a **non-copper based fungicide** to kill any fungal spores on the seeds. Replace the cling film again being careful not to touch the under side then replace the elastic bands. Label the pot on the outside. I usually write the plant name on a piece of paper and sellotape it to the outside of the pot. I next place the fifteen pots in a seed tray and leave this in a warm room in the house until germination occurs. At this point the whole tray is moved to the greenhouse staging just above the paraffin heater.

I sow mainly Mesembs and find March and September the best times to sow when day and night lengths are roughly equal. Germination is often within two or three days. Plants can remain in their mini greenhouses for up to 18 months depending on growth rate but I usually uncover them during their first Spring. Success rate by this method ~ over 80% of my pots are still full of healthy plants, some now up to two years old.

FURTHER READING:

Cactus Culture - based on Biology. Franz Buxbaum. 1958. (If you can find it. Ed.)
Slow growing cactus from seed. David Quail. BCSS Journal March 1997.

PLANTS I LIKE TO GROW

CALIBANUS HOOKERI Trel.

This is a plant I raised from seed some twenty odd years ago. Two plants survived from five seeds obtained at the time. Though it does not seem to prove difficult to grow it is not a plant you see in collections very often. This can probably be attributed to the fact it belongs amongst the weirdies. It is a plant which has a caudex which slowly gains girth through the years. It is of a lumpy nature and can eventually achieve massive proportions though not in the lifetime of a human being. This caudex is covered with an attractive, curly bark which may peel away from time to time. From this bark there sprout many tufts of blue-green grass-like leaves which have quite sharp edges, quite capable of inflicting cuts on the fingers if handled injudiciously. Even among caudiciform succulents this is an

oddy but a delightful one from my point of view.

It hails from Tamaulipas, in Mexico, and belongs to the Agave group of plants. Originally it was placed amongst the Lilacaeae. Lost for many years it was eventually rediscovered by Charlie Glass and Bob Foster in 1968 who were privileged to see a huge specimen which was described simply as being "as big as a Volkswagen".

In Mexico the leaves are used as thatching material and for use in scouring dishes as they contain a soap like substance. Now don't all rush to be "green" by changing from Fairy Liquid to Calibanus leaves.

This is a plant which was introduced back into Britain in the early 70's as habitat specimens. Those that I saw grew very little and eventually died away after many years, failing completely in their attempts to reroot. Propagation can only be really successful through the medium of seed raising.

Both my plants now reside in 12 inch clay pans which enjoy summer out in the garden. They have dissimilarities of body form. The leaves are noticeably different, one being much greener than the other and also having much thinner leaves. Eventually I expect they will be similar once past the juvenile stage.

In cultivation you can expect the body to attain a diameter of 40 to 50 cms (around 18 to 20 inches) so mine have a long way to go. Its height will reach 25cms, just short of a foot. This will take a multitude of years. The grass-like leaves reach a length of 40 cms or more. Mine has never flowered though I have seen a specimen which

did attain such a state. The flowers sit atop a branched inflorescence which is up to 60 cms in height and are a purplish-pink colour. The root structure under the caudex is fibrous and grows to a large size compared to the body.

According to literature this plant has rejoiced under various names. Hooker first named it as *Dasylyrion hartwegianum* followed by *Calibanus caespitosum*, the name Rose (of Britton and rose fame) chose for it. Finally its present name was designated by Trelease. Talking briefly to Gordon Rowley to ascertain this last piece of information he tells me he regards it as a *Nolina* as the differences are minimal. The name *Calibanus* was coined for it in the nineteenth century and based on Shakespeare's deformed giant, Caliban.

I use a well gritted soil containing John Innes no. 3 and added bone meal and water copiously, allowing the container to dry out between waterings which it does quite quickly in warm weather. Whilst outside I leave this to the elements unless we are going through a prolonged dry spell. If it is excessively wet they are protected from overwatering.

In some of the following books there are good pictures of the plants and further reading if you are interested.

Bibliography:

- Handbook of Succulent plants ~ Hermann Jacobsen
- Growing Succulent Plants ~ Victor Graham
- Succulents: The Illustrated Dictionary ~ Sajeva & Costanzo
- Caudiciform and Pachycaul Succulents ~ G. D. Rowley

SUBSCRIPTION RENEWALS

These are a long way off, I know, but this information is important. At the society AGM in mid April the Treasurer announced that he would prefer payment of subs to be made by cheque or through the auspices of the Branch Treasurer who will accept cash or cheques made out to the Branch. The reason for this request was due to the charges levied on the Society for the privilege of accepting card payments. So far UK subscriptions had cost £85, overseas subscriptions £75 and Bradleya subscriptions £60, a total of £200. For the foreseeable future subs are to remain at the same level.

NATIONAL SHOW 2000

A date in advance for your diary. The next National Show will be held at the same venue as last time in Spalding on Saturday 19th August. It is a well worth while event where you will see plants rarely seen elsewhere.

JUNE'S SPEAKERS

Alan Craig needs little introduction after his last visit when he enchanted those present at the meeting with tales of Chile and particularly about Copiapoas. We are certain of another entertaining account of something which has not happened in the living memory of many people - the desert blooming in Chile. There are many living in that area who have never experienced rain in their lifetime but 1997 saw it happen and Alan and his wife decided it was a must to return to their beloved trekking grounds.

Alan has not been as well as he would have liked but he has always maintained he wanted to come and give this talk so we are deeply indebted to him. **THANK YOU ALAN.**

On the other hand our visiting speaker from South Africa is not as well known on these shores. Anybody who reads the American Journal, Aloe, the South African Journal, and The Zimbabwean Journal, Excelsa will be well aware of this man's fame. **Ralph Peckover** is a hive of knowledge about **Southern African flora** in general but is especially well informed about **Brachystelmas and Ceropegias**, both tricky genera in our climate but particularly the former.

He is a horticulturist of note. He grows cacti but I think it is true to say he has a definite leaning to the cultivation of the Other Succulent plants. Now retired, his former job took him travelling through the majority of Southern African countries. During these travels he has acquired a vast knowledge of the flora in these countries as tonight's talk will prove. I have first hand knowledge that his slides are magnificent so we are in for a treat.

In retirement he has set up a Nursery where he is propagating many indigenous genera. He lives just outside Pretoria these days but I believe there was a time when he lived on or near the coast in the State of Natal.

WELCOME TO MANCHESTER RALPH.

He is combining two aims on his visit to our shores. He is paying a visit to Dorothy Minors from Sheffield who

was fortunate enough to be able to visit him whilst journeying in that area. Whilst over here he wants to trace his roots in this country and will be visiting a number of haunts such as Peckover Hall. He also expressed a wish to use his talents for the benefit of British Cactophiles and Succulentophiles so we jumped at the opportunity as it is not likely to be repeated.

BRANCH SHOW

With regret it was decided at the last Committee meeting that it would be less than feasible to continue with plans to stage this year's show. My work schedule will make it impossible to prepare plants for the show and also make it hard to fulfil my role as Show Manager. Others also announced they would be unable to spare the time to show though they would be prepared to help out with stewarding. Add to this the fact we have lost money for too many years now, we have decided to try a new venture.

Garden Centres will be approached to see if they would be willing to let us stage an "Education Day" where we would put on a small display whilst offering information about how to grow the plants and hopefully attract new members. The first such assignment is planned for the weekend **July 11th - 12th at the Daisy Nook Garden Centre.** At the Committee Meeting on Tuesday June 2nd agreement was reached that we should stage a display. It is understood that we will be permitted to sell plants, run a tombola and advertise the Society and Branch activities. We would like anybody who has the time and plants to loan a few for the stand. What we

definitely need is all the help you can offer. . . . even one hour will be of tremendous value. Further details should be available during the meeting tonight.

A CASTAWAY'S PLANTS

Many of you will be familiar with the Radio programme "Desert Island Discs". Well I thought it might be fun to run a series in the Newsletter along similar lines. The rules are simple. Choose six plants, cactus or succulent, that you would like to have as "companions" if it befell you that you were suddenly whisked away to a desert island. I'll start the ball rolling.

1. **Astrophytum myriostigma.**
A beautiful, spineless plant covered in myriads of small white spots, actually woolly patches, that flowers throughout the summer with large, delicate, pale yellow blooms that can last several days. A slow growing species so it will never outgrow its welcome.
2. **Rebutia heliosa.**
A gem amongst a genus of gems this plant is beautifully marked. In habitat it remains solitary or sparingly branched but in our greenhouses will clump up slowly over the years. The orange flowers are profuse and borne on a long tube. The spines shroud the plant giving it its rich colour.
3. **Mammillaria louisae.**
A large flowered, hooked spined beauty from Mexico. This plant can provide colour throughout the year, firstly with its gorgeous lavender flowers which are large and provide a succession of blooms for the late spring. These are followed by large,

bulbous, bright red seed pods which remain highly conspicuous for well over a year. As it is a plant that needs sparing watering the desert island atmosphere should suit it down to the ground.

4. **Lithops otzeniana.**

Out of the numerous array of Lithops I choose this one because of the highly variable tooth like islands dotted round the margin of the leaves. This species does not clump up readily, even in cultivation. It is a challenging plant at all times. The yellow flowers complement the elephant grey body.

5. **Aloe dichotoma.**

Not a plant that can be grown to its full mature splendour due to its final height reaching a superb 10 metres. However its ability to grow into a tree will have the added value of providing shade at any time of the day. Planted in the centre of the island it will be a landmark. When flowering its branches will be a mass of yellow blossom.

6. **Jatropha podagrica.**

As I find this a hard plant to grow in our damp climate I hope it will benefit from the long hours of sunshine that will be available. As I'm a fan of anything vaguely caudiciform this will console my desires. This shrub produces a caudex up to 50cm. high and noticeably of bulbous shape which is surmounted by many glossy green leaves and long stems of clusters of startling red flowers.

There, that's started the ball rolling. Now I would like each of you to choose six plants you would choose to grow whilst cast away in splendid isolation.

VERSE WITH A DIFFERENCE

Reading through some literature recently I came across some poetry with a difference. Well known poems which have been given a succulent slant and other intriguing thoughts.

"Mealy bug on cactus green
Tries to hide and not be seen
White and hairy, very small
Unseen among the cacti tall.

Pestiferous this little beast
On big and small alike it feasts
The cacti wither in the ground
The mealy bug grows fat and round.

The flowers die, but mealy bug
Eats on and on just like a slug.
Gets fatter, bigger, rounder still
Keeps eating, eating, eating, till...

The fated day comes round and then
Our mealy's forked out of his den
Looked at, studied, pale with fright,
Then SQUASHED and thrown out.
What a sight!!"

And yet again.....

How doth the busy botanist
Improve each shining hour,
Amending a generic list,
Renaming many a flower!

How busily he'll work all day
To sort out what's a which,
And place for good, or so he'll say,
Each species in its niche.

Contriving knowledge's advance,
His life-long work enables
The nurseryman to sell more plants
By altering his labels.