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Why I like to grow *Gymnocalycium* by Christopher Leather

During the June meeting where a selection of my flower photos were shown Peter wondered aloud why I might have concentrated my collecting on the genera *Gymnocalycium*. It is fair to say that most of my plants are from South America, even though I've never consciously noticed it in the past.

I think there are several reasons why I concentrated on *Gymnocalycium*s and I plan to relate some of those reasons below. Some of them are true reflections of cacti in general, others, it is clear, are mistaken beliefs based on lack of knowledge. I've always had some of all the cacti mentioned below, but only what I came across by chance, raffle prizes, sales plants when there were no *Gymnocalycium*s for sale and seedlings that have grown to maturity.

Early greenhouse photos (figs below) show a good selection of plants. There are common succulents like *Aloe*, *Lithops*, *Aeonium*, *Gasteria* and *Adromischus*. There are also all kinds of genera and types of cacti. Clumping ones, tall ones, globular ones, padded ones. I suspect that many of the succulents struggled because I may not have watered them enough, and at the correct time.

I also knew that, inevitably, the taller cacti would get killed off in the cold winters. Es-



postoa, *Cleistocactus* and anything ending in *cereus* all tended to die off. *Echinocereus* got counted here. So straight away I am limiting myself to *Opuntias* and globular cacti. *Frailea* also have appealed to me as they are small growing and are self-fertile – lots of free seed, but they very rarely got offered for sale. *Opuntias* in turn can quickly take over the greenhouse, and with space limited and also, to an extent, lack of supply from sellers *Opuntia* were never really considered. *Opuntia* are also shy to flower.

Ariocarpus are expensive, slow growing and tender so I always avoided anything ending in *carpus* – they must be all the same as they have a similar name – there goes *Turbinicarpus*. Other genera get counted out here as they would get flagged up in the meetings as slow growing or tender. *Copiapoa*, *Echinocactus*, and other things like that get dropped here. *Astrophytum* all look the same, so that rules those out. *Coryphantha* get sooty mould and *Mammillaria* have small flowers and all look alike. The same can be said for *Rebutia*.

Nobody grows *Notocactus*, and *Parodia* never seem to be offered for sale. Nobody grows *Echinopsis* either and no one can decide whether to call them *Lobivia*, *Trichocereus* or *Echinopsis*, so I would obviously stay away from those.

Many cacti are really spiny. There are two disadvantages to this. One, they soon get infested with mealy bug and you have a job seeing them and getting rid of them. Secondly, when buying a plant it is hard to see if it is alive, badly marked, or indeed over run with pests. So my preference is always to buy a plant that I can see is OK.

I do remember borrowing a book in 1995 about *Gymnocalycium*s. It was the John Pilbeam book. So by that time I must have been interested. I know I also went looking for the *Gymnocalycium* classes at our branch shows. There were also a couple of talks around that time about *Gymnocalycium*s, one by Graham Charles. Fig 3 also shows, I think, the first hints of the *Gymnocalycium* bug. Taken in 1998 it clearly shows all the *Gymnocalycium*s I had at the time segregated from the rest of the cacti.



Figure 3

I'll be the first to admit I have a collecting bug. If I decide to collect something I want the full set and won't rest until I have it. That applies to books, DVDs and music CDs as well as cacti. Clearly here there is also cause for concern. For *Mammillaria*, *Opuntia*, *Notocactus*, and many other genera there are going to be problems getting the full set. Names abound and there are hundreds of synonyms. *Gymnocalycium*s on the other hand turn out to be a very distinct group of plants with stable taxon limits. This I didn't know until recently – probably the June meetings. It turns out that it would be possible to get a full set of plants, but still have a large collection.

A rather interesting picture can be seen in fig 4. It probably doesn't show in the newsletter very well, but each of the labels has a complicated (and now un-fathomable) string of numbers in the format 13/1/0/10/10/0/2/3/1. What this refers to I have no idea, but it shows even then I must have been trying to make my plants fit some kind of "system".



Figure 4

Gymnocalyciums have a wide range of appearances yet they are fairly easy to recognise as Gymnocalyciums. They also have big showy flowers that are of various forms. Some also form big seedpods, so there is the encouragement to grow the seed. So it seems to me the following factors have come into play. They are easily recognisable, have big flowers and were regularly offered for sale. I could probably get the full set if I wished and there was a book available that listed that full set.

I do have all of the above genera in my collection, but never in as great a number as my Gymnocalyciums. Closely following in second place are Notocactus, Mammillaria, Rebutia, Frailea, Lobivia and Echinocereus. Thelocactus, Turbinicarpus, Astrophytum, Copiapoa and Ariocarpus all feature too. Many other genera are represented by one or two plants and are too numerous to name. Recently I've been trying to increase the different shapes of cacti, so Opuntia and ceroid cacti have been looked at when purchasing plants.

Mealy Bug Control

The summer of 2016 hasn't been the best for weather, so I've found I've perhaps not been in the greenhouse quite as much as I should. The better weather in early August prompted me to have a bit of a tidy up. From the visit of Jo and Peter in late July I knew there were a couple of plants that needed cleaning up because of mealy bug. Needless to say by the time I got round to the job I had an infestation on my hands.

My preferred choice for dealing with the odd mealy bug is to brush it off with a paint brush that I have that has plastic bristles. I accept I am never going to get rid of them 100%, but if I can keep on top of them I am reasonably happy. I've never liked using chemicals, as you need several different types and I always forget to use them. To really make the chemicals work repeated spraying over many weeks would be needed to really control the mealy bugs.

For very bad infestations the only way to get the mealy bug off is to use a hose pipe on the whole of the plant. You really need to give them a good soaking under high water pressure. The plants should be left to dry for over a week and careful inspection carried out over the week. Trust me, you think you've got them all, but you will find more. The new mealy bugs will be from the eggs that you didn't get rid of with the water. Another soaking, or picking off of the odd mealy bug, will be needed.

I have used Neem Oil in the past and it did seem to do the trick. Neem Oil does not kill the mealy bugs on contact. What it does, as I understand it, is to confuse the mealy bugs and stops them from eating. They then starve to death. Repeated weekly sprayings is essential, and then after one month, every few weeks or so. This is to catch the newly hatched mealy bugs. Those then don't eat and of course don't breed. Over time they should all die off.

To use Neem Oil you have two bottles. One is the Neem, the other is an emulsifier which allows the oil to mix with the water. If the Neem Oil has gone solid all you need to do is stand it in some warm water for a few minutes until it turns to a liquid. For every one litre of water you need 10ml of Neem and 10ml of emulsifier, the whole lot is then well shaken. I then apply liberally with one of those pressurised spray bottles (the ones with a pump handle on the top). Any left unused in the bottle should be discarded, and fresh mixture made every time.

I did read somewhere online that the smell of lavender oil also confuses the mealy bugs. My mum has some lavender spray and that does seem to be very effective at killing (well dissolving) mealy bugs and the eggs. There are also Lavender diffusers and the stuff in those bottles also seems to work a treat. Try it on a place on the plant that will not notice first. I think there is a little bit of acetone in the mixture, but not enough to burn the plant or roots.

There is also a way to help speed up the Neem Oil effectiveness and that is to really actively look for nests of eggs. This year I have made time to go through every single tray and pot.

I've cleaned every tray and checked every plant – the body, the neck, under the pot and under the rim. I'll not get everything but the more I do get the better the population control.

National Show 2016 by Peter Bint

August 20th 2016 saw a number of Manchester members head for Cambridgeshire. Every four years the Society puts on what many people consider as a 'not to be missed spectacular'. Not everybody agrees with this billing because it is not how they envisage the hobby for them—not everybody enjoys showing plants competitively. It does completely depend on what you want from the hobby which justifies the way you indulge in growing these wonderful plants. Judging at shows like these is always very subjective and hamstrung by 'rules' of how plants should be judged. Many of the growing fraternity do not agree with these artificial boundaries and it results in many heated discussions as to the merits of the judges choices. The other Manchester attendees will have their own views of the day and the spectacle that was presented for their enjoyment.

With the help of photos taken by Chris Leather I will endeavour to give you an insight into the events that led up to this brief look into the collections of the entrants by studying the plants they brought. This National Show began its planning back in 2012 not long after the previous Show had been cleared away. The Shows Committee met with members of the local branch, Cambridge in this case, to discuss many topics relevant to preparing for an event such as this. One of the most important matters needing careful attention is a suitable venue. Wood Green Animal Shelter at Godmanchester, near Huntingdon in Cambridgeshire, has been the chosen accommodation for the previous two events and as there were no other offers to house the show it was decided to go there again in 2016. What makes a place suitable to hold such an event? In the first place it has to be huge and all at ground level to accommodate the displays of plants which will need considerable manpower to move them around in some cases. Parking has to be very extensive to hold all the vehicles that will arrive on the day and there has to be provision made for any coaches that will be in attendance. There has to be a large area to house all the entrants' and sellers' vehicles and it must be absolutely next to the hall. The venue must have suitable facilities for eating that will have to cope with the large crowds that will attend. The competition hall needs to be light and airy. There has to be a very clear entrance way through which the visitors gain admission and other entrances used by competitors and salespeople need to be clearly marked as not available to the visitors. The venue has to have suitable tabling in large quantities for both the show and the sales area. This staging has to be capable of holding considerable weight as some very large plants will be on display. Seating around the hall needs to be plentiful to allow everybody the opportunity to rest their weary limbs because it will be tiring walking round the hall. There has to be the capability to access the hall by the organisers at times well outside normal working hours. Most of all there has to be a good working relationship between the owners and workers of the hall and the extended shows personnel of the Society. This is just a skeleton of the organisation that has to be considered by the Society

during the four year build up to the show. One thing that really ought to be considered is the location of suitable venues; how easy is it for people to get to the show? Previous shows have been held in Nottingham, Luton, Manchester and Spalding but with the move away from national motorways at Spalding and now Godmanchester the shows have become slightly more remote. Another bone of contention which has been raised yet again was the airless condition of the hall. 4 years ago it was the hottest day of the summer and the hall was absolutely stifling. This time it was cooler but the inside was still immensely stuffy. The lighting for a show of this magnitude was less than sufficient but not enough to spoil the viewing. In all other ways the Shows Committee can be praised for producing another memorable day

Let's look at this year's show; I take the liberty of copying directly from the Society web site for the show. *The National Show is held every 4 years and as well as being the most prestigious event for the Society it is also the largest competitive cactus & succulent show in Europe. The Show is for not just for those members who like to show off their plants, it is also a forum for all members to meet old friends and make new ones, and a chance to buy plants and accessories.*

This year the show has attracted a record 30 nurseries and growers offering a wide range of cacti and succulents which will be a great opportunity to add to your collections. There will also be plant sundry sales and specialist society tables with lots of time to catch up with old friends.

There certainly was a wide range of choice of plants to buy, a source of temptation on every stall to empty your pockets of hard earned cash, a headache as to how to fit the new acquisitions into an already overcrowded space. But in spite of all this I had the impression that sellers were not as busy as they expected to be. It must have taken hours packing everything into boxes and then into the transport. Then there was all the unpacking at the show and setting up the stalls. Lo and behold, in the blink of an eye, 24 hours had passed and it was pack up again, load the vans and off home. My overall impression of the crowds present was one of sadness in a way. The crowds did not seem as great as in previous years. The hall never seemed packed, exhibits were easy to get to; in the past it has been a struggle to view the show tables but it wasn't this time. It was also very noticeable that the show entries that had taken centre stage in the last show were not there. Had they died, were they too heavy to be pulled out again, were the owners no longer able to exhibit them for whatever reason, had the desire to exhibit them faded? Who knows—only the owners I suspect. However, there were many splendid plants on display, many of the usual exhibitors were in evidence and there were new names as well, our own Mike Bridges for one (even though one or two of the exhibitor's cards read Mark Bridges). There was also a shift in which classes were popular to enter. Copiapoa classes were very well supported but old favourites like Mammillaria, Aloe, Euphorbia, Echinocereus to name some were relatively disappointing this time. For those who love the other succulents there were some really stunning exhibits.

There was also the usual bone of contention in evidence. The Society had to put out a statement about the sale and exhibiting of 'habitat specimens'. With a lot of nurseries, particularly those in habitat countries, collecting and farming plants that have been threatened with mass extinction due to economic projects there are a lot of plants around

that look as though they are plants illegally taken from habitat though of course they are not. This leads to criticism in some quarters as people say these exhibits should not be tolerated. The Society is caught between a rock and a hard place and whatever it does it will be harshly criticised. If it saves endangered plants it should be done but should they feature in shows???

A hard question with no definitive answer.

On a visual note here are a few pictures taken by Chris Leather at the show.



This plant in the final picture was the subject of much discussion. *Pachypodium brevicaule*, was it grafted, had it been farmed, was it habitat collected, had it been grown in this country, had it been raised from seed many years ago by an amateur grower? Whatever the answer it was a splendid plant and deserved to be admired. A lot more could be written but space is lacking. Comments invited.