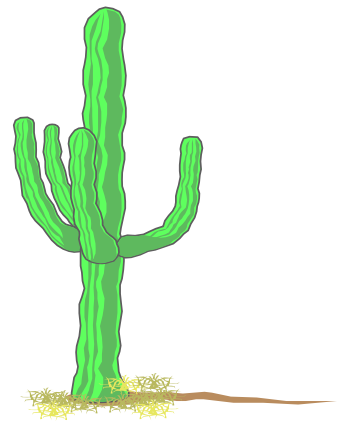


Oxotica

The bi-annual newsletter of the Oxford Branch of the
British Cactus and Succulent Society

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CHAIRMAN'S Message

WELL FOLKS, it's the end of a very extraordinary year, as I write I am sure we are all looking forward with positivity to the return of some normality. I am sure that we have all been affected in some way by the numerous restrictions imposed due to the Covid 19 virus and I hope that all of you have managed to deal with these in you own way to stay safe.

I would hope that we will be able to resume Branch meetings in 2021 and that some of you may have enjoyed the various presentations that have been available on the BCSS Zoom meetings on Tuesday evenings.

The good thing about our hobby is that we can enjoy the splendour of our plants, which can reward us in many ways, so I trust that whatever type of collection you have that you have enjoyed your plants.

I look forward to being able to meet you all again in the not too distant future and wish you all best wishes for Christmas and the New Year ahead.

Good growing

Bill Darbon



Christmas Cactus

Bill Darbon

My year of lockdown

by Mary Stone

What a strange year! My first concern was that I had produced plenty of plants for the Branch's selling opportunities and my shelves were full. I resolved that problem by putting plants out by my front gate and asking for contributions for the Oxford Food Bank. I was surprised that a tray of plants was being emptied each day and that everyone was very generous. That and honesty was very heartening. I was able to send a substantial sum to the Food Bank. Having cleared some space, I have since been taking more cuttings and hoping that we will be able to dispose of them in the usual way next year.

Life in the greenhouse continues quite brightly. There are still plenty of Crassulas in flower - especially bright is *C. falcata*!

Otherwise, interest is kept going by the Pelargoniums coming back to life. I have a fairly big collection particularly of those with a tuber. After a summer of dormancy it is always good to have them to give me something to look after, when the other plants settle down for the winter. There is often a moment of worry when some seem slow to show life, but I think I have only lost one this year. I don't know why it gave up on me. A pleasant surprise was when my daughter gave me three plants which she had acquired through a bulb exchange of the Nerine Society!

Now I am looking forward with hope of a less lock-downed year to come and being able to meet up with everyone again.

Wrapping up for Winter

Bill Darbon

Like us all it's around this time that we realize what little space we have to play with getting all the plants somewhere for the winter. Some of us who have had a number of plants outside for the summer suddenly realize that there is not as much space as there was before.

There are a number of things we can do - the first is to ensure that all the plants are dry before the real cold weather comes. Some folk cover or wrap up their plants with fleece or the greenhouse with bubble plastic, those who do not have the luxury of a large space cram as much as possible into the available space. Those who have just a window sill or have very small collections may move their plants to a warmer space. Don't forget to make sure that the plants have enough light during the duller days of winter.

Look at and check the heating (whatever type you have) to ensure that it's working. Personally I feel a bit like the Nazareth Inn Keeper!! as there is not much room to move with all the plants on the floor etc. I just hope that it's not too bad a winter and that everything will survive; fortunately plants do not have to "socially distance and can keep each other company.

Some images of the problem:



Double Double Toil and Trouble (My life with insecticides)

By John Watmough

The first insecticide I ever bought was a 4% nicotine solution. It was supplied in a ribbed poison bottle and I was required to sign the poisons book in the chemists. To do that, the law required that one should be over sixteen years old. I was only fourteen, but even then I was an accomplished liar and I was accustomed to blagging my way into Watford's Empire Cinema to watch X-rated (over sixteen) French films, having adopted a squeaky voice to claim half-fare on the bus. 4% nicotine would burn if you got it on your skin, and I should have drawn the conclusion that smoking was bad for the health. Instead I took to smoking Capstan Full Strength and roll-your-owns made of Black Shag. (The only cigarettes that defeated me were Gauloises Papier Maïs and a recondite brand called De Reszke). Anyway, 4% nicotine solution would exterminate all insect pests most satisfactorily. I was most interested to read, years later, a letter in the BCSS Journal in which the writer described his practice of emptying the ashtrays from the pub next door into his water butt. He claimed never to have seen any of the pests that still plague us to this day.

Nicotine was already illegal when I resumed cactus growing in 1981. The best all-purpose insecticide then was Malathion. I had three children, so three times I received a letter from the County's nit nurse to say that my child was infested with head lice and I was to ensure that the entire family's hair was treated with a Malathion compound available from the chemist. This could not be washed out for twenty-four hours. Unfortunately at the time shepherds were contracting diseases of the nervous system through handling sheep-dip, so Malathion, the most effective eradicator of root mealy bug, was in its turn banned. Very luckily, several years later, I won a large illegal bottle of Malathion in the tombola at Cholsey Primary School Fete.

Murphy's Systemic Insecticide took its place as growers' favoured remedy. Unfortunately the manufacturers removed the active ingredient without telling anybody, and the remaining liquid appeared to serve as a mealy bug tonic and restorative. Also useful, though I thought expensive, were Plant Pins. These were short lengths of thick cardboard impregnated with an effective insecticide that you poked down into the pot. They went off sale for an unfortunate reason. New regulations required that a manufacturer had to spend a million pounds on exhaustive testing of a product before it could be licensed for sale. The annual sales of Plant Pins did not amount to a million pounds, so that was that.

The most widely used systemic insecticide and acaricide was Dimethoate. This was not, under stricter legislation, available to amateur growers. Apparently it is not safe to drink it. Luckily I was able to obtain five litres of the stuff under the pretence that I was a bona-fide commercial fruit grower. (I have two apple trees and a plum tree). During a visit to Somerset I discovered that a commercial apple orchard was mixing (itself illegal) three banned chemicals in a big drum and forcing unprotected Eastern

Europeans to spray the crops with the mixture. Every year the inhabitants of the nearest village would suffer from palpitations and numbness in the extremities. That might explain why Russian housewives will only buy apples if they have maggot holes in them. If you get Dimethoate on your skin (which you should avoid) you can taste it. Ugh! That shows how effectively systemic it is. Perhaps it is a cure for Hookworm, Roundworm, Tapeworm, Bilharzia and Liver Fluke. Don't try it, though. It sounds like something that Dr Trump would recommend.

In case readers should think I am being frivolous, it should be pointed out that Herr Uebelmann, none other, was found dead in his greenhouse. He had foolishly started spraying at the door end, and by the time he reached the closed end the concentration of poison was enough to kill him.

For some years visitors to the Continent would purchase at great expense a substance similar to Dimethoate that we would jovially refer to as "Agent Orange". It was illegal in the UK "because of EU regulations". But it was manufactured in Germany, and the instructions on the bottle related to amateur greenhouse use.

Some years ago I was told that some enthusiasts had located a source of "Dynamec Universal Destroyer". Would I like to join a syndicate to buy one litre of it at great expense? Yes, please! Several weeks later a lady conspiratorially took me to one side and surreptitiously fished out of her handbag an ordinary 100 ml medicine bottle of colourless fluid and gave it to me along with a many-times copied leaflet. When I got home I read the instruction leaflet very carefully. The passage that worried me more than somewhat was the recommendation that if any came into contact with the skin, the affected person should wrap themselves in a clean white sheet and walk slowly to the nearest cemetery. Alarmed, I rang the leader of the consortium. "No need to worry. We got some on ourselves when we were decanting it." A thought occurred to me. "Where did you do the decanting?" "On the serving hatch of our meeting hall kitchen." Eeek! All I can say is that the three ladies who re-enacted *Macbeth* Act IV Scene I are still alive. So am I.

More recently a kindly farmer pressed on me a carton of granules of what he said was a sure-fire systemic insecticide. I was earnestly exhorted to keep it well hidden while crossing international frontiers. On inspection, I learned that the active ingredient was Imidacloprid, which is a neonicotinoid. The wheel has turned full circle. Unfortunately, such substances are blamed for killing bees and other vital insects. I would therefore recommend moving dosed plants to somewhere other than where the bee sucks. It might be pertinent to mention that Imidacloprid is the active ingredient in the effective though expensive Frontline treatment for keeping cats and dogs free of fleas.

Enough time has now elapsed for the perpetrators in my final story to have moved on, retired, or earned promotion out of harm's way. A former Director of Kew Gardens decided that biological control was the ecologically sound way of controlling greenhouse pests. He instituted a prize for the department that most successfully kept pests down by the use of natural predators. The Arid Lands department unfortunately found that natural predators did not thrive in their hot and dry conditions. So the staff

conspired to sneak in periodically during the night and spray their charges with one or several of the potions described above. And they won the Director's prize!

To sum up, newcomers to the hobby need not feel that they have to take up lying, cheating or smuggling to keep their plants safe. Fairy Liquid is effective in normal concentrations against mealy bugs, root mealybugs, and other sucking nasties. Mothballs keep thrips at bay. And try to protect hoverflies, rapid-running red mites, ladybirds, and jumping spiders. They are all friends.

ODE

by Bill Darbon

Oh! what to do
To not get the Flu
Or the dreaded virus
Even more disastrous
To wear a mask
For every task
To keep apart
To save the heart

Avoid contact and keep your distance
Build up your resistance
What should I do with all this time
Finding a suitable rhyme
Isolated in my bubble
I must not get into trouble

I have my plants to help the boredom
I could even surf the BCSS Forum
I talk to them, but they do not reply
But reward me as I go by
With their flowers shapes and beauty
I think that it's my duty

To keep them as best I can
I must devise a good plan
I suppose I could while away many hours
Keeping dry from all the showers
It may be strange to other folk
But to me I am sure they spoke

The reward is unending
With all the time that I am spending
Just seeing them standing there
It seems strange to have such an affair
With these objects of my desire
To better plants I do aspire

Now I must take stock
Of exactly what I've got
Are there some that need to go
But can I bear them to throw
Those who have been so fine
But I suppose that there comes a time

When even the best of what I had
Must find time to go, I know it's sad
But that's ok as I am sure to find
Something I may have left behind
That will fill the space
And leave no trace
Of what was there before
Which leaves me more room to explore

For them to do their thing
Just in time for the spring
For me to admire
To what I do desire
The best of what we can do
Will hopefully make the nicest of you
Help us in this time of need
In the future to succeed

ADU

Editorial

At one point I wondered whether we could publish an issue of Oxotica at this time. I had received no material for it. Because of the Covid19 pandemic nobody had been on trips abroad or at home, there had been no show or sales opportunities to report on, and no details could be given about next year's events. Still, it seemed a shame to miss an edition now, for the first time, so my thanks to those who rallied around. The first issue of Oxotica was on March 6th 1996, so this one completes 25 years of publication.

DSG