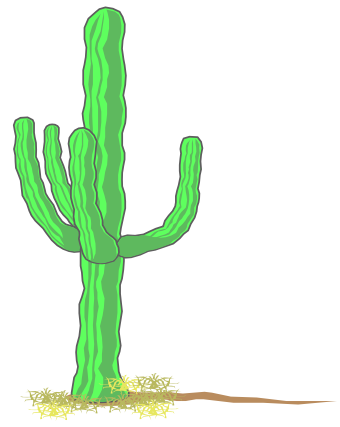


Oxotica

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

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CHAIRMAN'S CHAT

Hi Folks

Well what can I say about this year so far. The Branch and the Society were planning another wonderful year of activities for us all to enjoy. It all started so well, but who knew what was in store for us in the future.

I am sure have been affected in one way or another by this terrible virus. To keep us safe from infection we have all been encouraged to stay at home and maintain social distancing. Thank goodness we have a hobby that we can enjoy although it's not quite the same without physically meeting each other and having events to attend, but all very necessary to hopefully to see us through.

Most events have had to be cancelled so the Society have tried to keep a virtual interest by on line presentations which I hope some of you have managed to log in to and enjoy. At branch level we decided to do this as well. Grateful thanks to Martin for hosting the presentation. We hope to continue these monthly till we know where we are in respect of social gatherings.

I hope that you have been able to make the best of the recent good weather and have been re potting or sowing seeds or tidying the garden, and that your plants are budding and flowering.

I can only wish you all continued good health and look forward to when we can all meet again and share some of our experiences.

Good growing

Bill Darbon

DOUG WILLIS

It is with great sadness that we announce the death of one of our best-loved members, Mr Doug Willis of Highworth, near Swindon. During the existence of Swindon Branch, Doug used to attend meetings of both Oxford and Swindon Branches. He always liked to play a full part in our activities. He was especially valuable on the sales table, for his cheerful presence there always seemed to make a marked improvement on the day's takings. After the demise of Swindon Branch, Doug used to put in a regular attendance at the meetings of Wilts Branch in Melksham.

Doug's chief interests were Cacti and the smaller Agaves. He was a very good propagator, which meant that he always had interesting plants for sale. His record for *Ariocarpus* growing was seed to flower in three years, and on the plants' own roots too. Admittedly the species was *agavoides*, the fastest, but that is at least a season better than other growers in this country can aspire to. Many of us have some prettily patterned and striped Agaves in our collections that emanated from Highworth.

Sadly, Doug suffered a long and progressive illness believed to have been attributable to an industrial disease, so that he was unable to travel in the last few years of his life. His family, to whom we offer our sincerest condolences, have passed on Doug's plants to Oxford Branch. We shall intend to arrange for their disposal when circumstances permit.

John Watmough

ASTROPHYTUM PLANTS

by Bill Darbon

For a long time, since I have been collecting succulent plants and particularly cacti, I have been drawn to the many different plant forms of the *Astrophytum* group, mainly for their esthetic shapes, distinctive markings and wonderful flowers. I have been fortunate to obtain some lovely specimens over the years, some unfortunately no longer with me.

I have not had the experience of seeing these wonderful plants in habitat, but pictures from a number of speakers has whetted my appetite to do so sometime in the future.

My first plant was an *asterias* from Bungart in Germany over 35 years ago when we visited him; this I found was on a small graft. I managed to keep it for about 10 years when it sadly was relegated to the compost heap when the graft went rotten and I was not able to save the main plant body. Ever since, I have been picking up various plants of the genus from a number

of nurseries and plants sales. I suppose if I had a favourite it's either the 'Super kabuto' form or *capricorne*. BUT how can you choose when they are all so lovely in their own way. I always seem to be able to find room for just one more.



I find with most of the forms of *asterias* crosses, that once they start to shrink at the base they are very difficult to bring back, so I tend to water them more than the other species. I have been reasonably successful in growing most of the species, but still find the 'Onzuka' form more difficult to maintain in good growth and prevent from shrinkage. My cultivation methods over the years have varied in different types of soil mixes and between terracotta and plastic pots. More recently, I have introduced some limestone in a much more

open mix, and water a little more frequently, but never in full sun.

I was able to find two nice *Digitostigma caput-medusae* at ELK a couple of years ago, which I have managed to flower beautifully. This is clearly very different from the normal *myrostigma* or other forms of the species, but with a typical *Astrophytum* flower. I have not been able to set any seed on this plant although I have tried crossing the flowers and with other species, but still no success. I suspect I may need two different clones to be successful. Also I keep this plant in a small saucer so as not to let it dry out so much.

I find that all other species appear to set seed quite freely and produce numerous seeds for propagation.



I was fortunate to acquire a very old plant of *ornatum* (ex John Warwick) some years ago, which is a real beauty and has won me some prizes at shows.

The many forms of the species are quite varied and a small group of plants in the greenhouse can give a collector a lot of pleasure with the different forms and marks on the plant bodies. Also the spectacular flowers in the summer are wonderful. I would encourage any collector interested in cacti to make room for at least one or two of this rewarding species.



DROOLING SPINES

By John Watmough

Toilet Paper

Members of the Mesemb Study Group may have encountered a small paragraph in the *MSG Bulletin* (only £12 per annum) recommending various uses to which surplus toilet paper, which many of us are bound to have large quantities of as a result of panic buying at the beginning of lockdown, may be put. One of these suggestions is less facetious than the others and it might be of help to growers, so I am repeating it here. When harvesting mesemb seed, place the hydrochastic (breaking open when wet) capsule in a small container of water. When it opens out, stir it around in the water, and scrape out any

seed still adhering with a blunt instrument. Throw away the empty capsule. Then pour off as much water as you dare. Transfer the remainder, with the seed, on to a wad of unused toilet paper and allow to dry. When it is dry, scrape the seed into a seed envelope with a teaspoon and label it. It is then ready to sow when you judge the time is appropriate.

Another use of toilet paper comes courtesy of Les Percy in the latest *Haworthiad*. (Les gives credit to Brian McDonough.) In the case of recalcitrant seed of no matter what plant Family, arrange it on a wad of damp toilet paper, seal it in a polythene bag, and place in a propagator or on a suitable windowsill or bench. The merit of this method is that you can easily inspect the seed as often as you

like. Using tweezers, you can transfer the germinated seeds one by one into a pot. Thus the small plants can start life in tidy rows, unlike in my own system where the seed is sown directly in small pots and comes up in untidy clumps that have to be separated at the next stage.

Number three use for surplus toilet roll is in harvesting those seeds that emerge from dehiscence through a basal pore (falling through a hole in the bottom of the seed pod) and remain on the top of the plant. I am thinking of *Strombocactus* in particular, but some *Thelocactus* behave in this way as well. Personally I have a “pooter”, which was once liberated from a local hospital. Essentially a “pooter” consists of two flexible tubes fitted into a receptacle. You suck down one, and aim the other at the seed, which is transferred into the receptacle. The tube you suck is blocked off with a grille so that you don't get a mouthful. David Quail recommends another procedure. You simply blow the seed off the top of the plant into a paper bag, held strategically to receive it. Why didn't I think of that? Well, we're not all Einstein. Josh Field, recently of our Branch, uses surplus toilet paper. You pack round the base of the plant so as to stop the top dressing and the compost from falling out. Then you hold the plant upside-down over a plate or a sheet of paper and shake it or tap it gently.

On the other hand, if you are repotting *Ferocactus* and happen to run out of toilet paper to mop up the blood (a cactus enthusiast, by definition, will prefer slashed hands to the possibility of damaged spine-tips caused by wearing gloves),

remember another old nostrum. The abundant wool at the top of plants that were once called *Wigginsia*, such as *Parodia* (or *Notocactus*) *erinacea*, is styptic. That is, it stops bleeding.

Four hundred glorious years

According to the Oxford Mail, the four hundredth anniversary of the erection of the first greenhouse in this country will occur on 15th June, 2021. It was in Oxford, naturally. A gardener was employed to tend a charcoal fire through the night, presumably in the Oxford University Physic Garden. Nowadays the government pays me £200 per year to heat my greenhouse, though there is talk of taxpayer resistance to mollycoddling the aged. That's nothing, though. A lady farmer who used to live near Slough could get three feet of annual growth on her Espostoas, plus abundant flowers. DeFRA in one of its previous manifestations used to pay for keeping her greenhouse at 32 Celsius through the winter. No doubt they subsidised her fertiliser as well.

Anyway, perhaps our friends in the Botanic Garden will find a way of celebrating this important milestone in human history. Maybe they can bring down the price of their own brand gin.

VEGETATIVE PROPAGATION 2

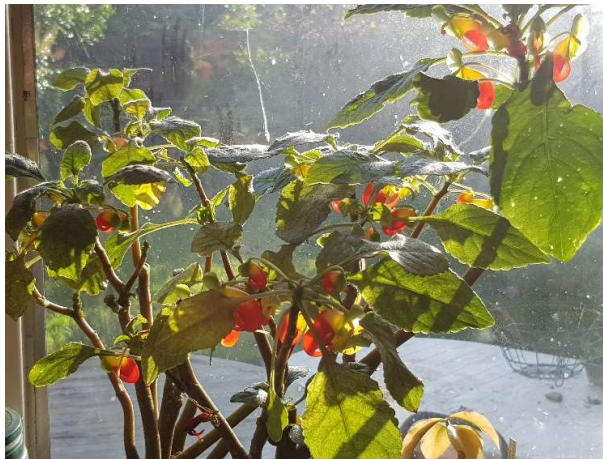
By David Greenaway

This is an update of my article 'Vegetative Propagation' in the June 2019 Oxotica

The Kalachoes and Pereskias have all grown on fine and some sold on Branch sales - before the 'Lockdown'. The *Hoya carnosa* cuttings rooted in water easily, and grew on well after potting up. My *Cissus quadrangularis* needed a prune, so I cut the long stems off and then cut them into sort lengths with 2 or 3 nodes. Put into water - the right way round - these rooted vigorously. A branch of *Hylotelephium spectabile* 'Touchdown Teak' in the garden broke off in the wind, so into water it went; it rooted readily; this is another genus (formally Sedum) whose cuttings Kapitany and Schulz say need no callousing.

I suppose that all of the plants mentioned here would root by conventional methods, but I like to try to start them off by the water-only method, in glass jars, as any roots are visible and it easy to avoid drying out. They seem to pot-on without trouble.

I am now rooting cuttings of the tropical plant *Impatiens niamniamensis* (the Parrot Plant) in water. This plant appears to have (green) succulent stems; it drops all its leaves if not watered regularly, but seems to be somewhat drought resistant otherwise. Jacobsen in his Lexicon of Succulent Plants lists two species of *Impatiens* as succulent: *Impatiens mirabilis* and *Impatiens tuberosa*. Should *Impatiens niamniamensis* be added to the list? Perhaps it was named after the Niam-Niam parrot (*Poicephalus crassus*).



Parrot Plant

Non-succulents

Of the (six) cuttings of Bougainvillea that I mentioned in the previous article three rooted and three did not, though I have kept them, in water, until now. We went to Lanzarote over Christmas and stayed where there were many cultivars of Bougainvillea; I brought home some assorted cuttings, but none have rooted.