

Balsall &  
District



Horticultural  
Society

November/December 2021

# Newsletter

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Dear Members,

Our AGM & Buffet Supper will soon be upon us, and we hope to see many of you on November 25<sup>th</sup> at 7.30pm in the Village Hall. Tickets are £6 from Helen Jones whose contact details are above. There will be no sales nor competitions tables. We aim to keep the AGM as short as possible, so that we can enjoy Sue Edwards' buffet supper and each other's company. This will be **the last time** Sue caters for this event – something she has done for years, and this year has coped with surgery too.

In fact, many of your committee have held their posts for a long time ..... who fancies writing the Newsletter x 10 months of the year?!!

Committee member Doug Timmis sends a big thank you to all BDHS members who donated their Sainsburys Heroes cards to him. With our donations as well as those from friends and the congregation at Balsall Common Methodist Church, Doug took a grand total of 1026 cards to Springfield House School, just outside Temple Balsall. The school uses them to reward pupils for good effort in class – “they love them”!

At our last meeting at the end of October, we welcomed 3 new members: Gloria Cordery, Nicola Content and Gordon Clark. We hope you will enjoy your time with us.

It is with sadness that we record the sudden death earlier this month of member Peter Vine. Neighbour Dave Felthouse remembers Peter as a very keen gardener. When Peter retired from the Volvo dealership in Hampton – in – Arden where he was Service Manager, he worked as a gardener for a select group of clients. After giving this up he concentrated on his own garden which he and his wife loved. Our condolences go to his wife Kath, daughters Sarah, Anna (in Australia) and Rebecca, and the grandchildren.

We do not meet in December, so the AGM & Supper and this Newsletter concludes 2021. Our Programme Secretary Alison Watson has worked extremely hard putting together a new programme of speakers for 2022, starting on Thursday 28<sup>th</sup> January. Alison faced many difficulties this last year as her planned programme for 2021 was turned upside down by Covid, with some speakers (and members) being unable to do Zoom. She deserves a big thank you for keeping our programme going, with significant juggling and headaches along the way!

Finally, St Mary's Church, Firs Lane, Haseley, near Warwick, CV35 7LS, (go down the side of Hatton Village Hall off the A4177), are holding another open weekend with the church decorated with flowers for Christmas. The dates are 11th & 12th December, 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Don't forget to wrap up warm for this event!

With best wishes to you all,

Marion

## SPEAKER REPORT

### “So, You Think You’ve Got Problems!”

On 28<sup>th</sup> October we welcomed back Stan Griffin & Vicki Newman from Craig House Cacti, winners of nine RHS Chelsea Flower Show Gold Medals, as well as awards from other shows around the country. Stan & Vicki last visited us in 2009 when they spoke at length about growing succulents. Their slant **this time** focused on the problems they encounter when exhibiting at shows, before moving on to caring for succulents.

Stan began growing succulents in his teens some 60 years ago, after a friend introduced him to them. He was given some cuttings and, as houses had no central heating in those days, he made a mini glass cold frame with a light bulb & tin plate, to provide low heat in his chilly front room! From there Stan progressed to an aluminium greenhouse with glass panes held in with metal clips, but the glass had a habit of cracking. He then changed to a wooden Alton greenhouse heated by paraffin. He soon learned not to let the heater run dry, as the soot played havoc with his plants! Former teacher Vicki was a more recent convert to succulent growing. Her father had been a member of the Birmingham branch of the British Cactus & Succulent Society, and she used to accompany him, meeting Stan at one of the shows.

Together they formed Craig House Cacti, turning a hobby into a business, and becoming affectionately known as ‘The Cactus Couple’, resplendent in their cactus themed outfits at shows. They do not own a nursery but work out of a big, rented glasshouse on a friend’s land, and a polytunnel in their back garden in West Bromwich. The glasshouse was erected with good floor insulation, essential for over – wintering succulents. These plants also require heating to maintain a temperature of 2 -4 °C and the glasshouse has gas heating. In contrast, the polytunnel “eats” electricity to heat it. Wooden frames divide the glasshouse into 3 bays lined with bubble wrap. All their plants are overwintered in the middle bay which is the warmest. Of note Lithops, or ‘Little Bums’, to aptly describe their appearance, will tolerate – 15 °C, and Rebutia flower better after a cold winter.

Stan and Vicki usually exhibit at major shows between April & September, and these can cause a headache. Applications must be submitted the year before one intends to exhibit. This is not easy when one cannot be certain of what plants will be looking good in a year’s time and therefore what design and size the exhibit may take. Where one expects to be sited on a showground, and services such as proximity to parking and water, can turn out to be a disappointment. Stan and Vicki have trudged “miles” with exhibits when their vehicle has been parked some distance from their stand. Not an easy feat when carrying spiny cacti! Sometimes stands are not the size they had requested, nor where they had expected to be in the marquee. They once arrived at a show at 8am armed with exhibits, only to find that the RHS staff had yet to erect the staging and didn’t do so until 4pm. Stan and Vicki now take all their own staging. It is something of a lottery if the site in a marquee is a good one or not. It is no fun being sited in an out of the way corner bereft of customers, or given a very wet spot with no bark chippings to soak up the excess moisture until just before the public are allowed in. Staging that sinks into soft ground can sometimes cause exhibits to tumble off. Stan and Vicki detest the sound of falling pots of gravel and plant! There’s ‘nowt so queer as folk’ as the saying goes and both have met all sorts of ‘folk’ at shows. Whilst some engage in conversation and “muck in” when problems arise during a show’s duration, others can be quite stand – offish, seemingly put off by the couple’s Black Country accent. Nonetheless, the couple have enjoyed success and fame in a relatively short space of time on the show circuit.

Moving on to the plants themselves, Stan explained the difference between the terms ‘succulents’ and ‘cacti’. Succulents are plants with thickened fleshy parts which can retain water, so they are usually found in arid parts of the world. Cacti form just a small part of the succulent family; in other words, cacti are succulents. All cacti come from the Americas, extending from Canada to Patagonia and the West Indies. A cactus also has light to dark coloured bumps or ‘areoles’, out of which the spines grow, plus flowers and new shoots. Succulents do not possess areoles.

Succulents, except for Aeoniums which grow all the year round, should only be watered and fed between March (when the clocks go forward) and October (when the clocks go back). Watering should be weekly and feeding every 3 weeks. Water from the top until liquid starts to appear in the saucer beneath, emptying any excess after 30 mins. Never let pots stand in water. Stan uses a hosepipe and has no saucers beneath his pots. With terrariums, push in a kebab skewer and if it comes out clean then it is dry enough

to need water.

Overwinter succulents in a cool place. Heat is only needed for some of the Euphorbias. The unheated porch of a house is a good site as the porch takes up heat from the house. By this time of year pots should be fully dry for overwintering. Resist all temptation to water from November to the end of February, including terrariums.

Potting on should only be done when a plant reaches the edges of a pot, although it is worth noting that some succulents flower better when pot bound. The next sized pot should only be a half inch increase on either side. Ensure that a very gritty mix is used of 50 : 50 horticultural grit and compost (Stan uses a John Innes 2 although this is peat based & will soon disappear). He never uses sand nor crocks in the bottom of his pots. He laments that there are few good composts currently on the market. Only one manufacturer lists the exact ingredients in their mix and that is the Dalefoot Company of Cumbria. Included is sheep wool, bracken and comfrey (a good source of potash). Dalefoot also produce different composts for different types of plants, such as their tomato compost. Some manufacturers use green waste which may have been derived from pernicious weeds or contain herbicide, bark that may have come from diseased trees, or coir which can appear dry on the surface yet wringing wet below. Handling a prickly plant when potting on is easier to do using polystyrene or bubble wrap, rather than big gloves which are often cumbersome. Do NOT water a newly potted on succulent for 2 weeks. Taking cuttings uses the same 50 : 50 potting mix. It is essential that all cuttings must be allowed to dry out for at least a week to form a callous over the cut end. When the cutting is potted up do NOT water it for at least 2 weeks, with Vicki quoting "water it in, throw it in the bin", as the cutting will rot from the bottom up.

Stan ended his talk with an amusing tale about a Cactus Society coach trip to Europe where everything that could go wrong did. Thankfully our society's trips have never endured such problems!

## TOPICAL TIPS

### NOVEMBER

- Complete planting of tulips and other spring bulbs.
- Lift and store *Dahlias*.
- Protect plants of doubtful hardiness with a mulch or with bracken or straw.
- Protect container plants from frost by wrapping in fleece or bubble wrap in cold spells.
- Stop feeding house plants as light levels diminish and growth slows.
- Take root cuttings of plants such as oriental poppies and Japanese *Anemones*.
- Prune long stems of roses to reduce damage from wind-rock
- Clear fallen leaves from lawns and put into black sacks to form leaf mould.
- Plant new roses, fruit trees, and hardy deciduous trees and shrubs.

- Remove dead leaves and dead vegetation from ponds and remove and clean pumps and fountains and store in frost-free shed
- Plant more indoor bulbs for display in the New Year.
- Begin pruning fruit trees after leaf fall.
- Fix grease bands to trunks of fruit trees.
- Prune acers, birches, laburnum, walnuts and vines as they may 'bleed' if cut after midwinter.
- Bring prepared bulbs such as *Hyacinths* into well-lit areas for flowers at Christmas.
- Grow salad leaves under glass for winter pickings.
- Clean and service garden machinery.

### DECEMBER

- Ensure that dead leaves and debris are removed from alpinas as they will die if kept wet for too long.
- Take hardwood cuttings.
- Harvest leeks, parsnips, winter cabbage, sprouts and remaining root crops
- *Azaleas* and *Rhododendrons* will benefit from a top dressing of compost/manure.
- Deciduous trees and shrubs can still be planted.
- When cutting evergreens for Christmas decoration, bear in mind that you do not want a misshapen tree/shrub left for next year.
- Reduce watering of houseplants.
- Seed catalogues are available, so it is time to plan for next year.

## COMPETITIONS PAGE

A lighter – hearted quiz for the Christmas Season. You should **all** be able to do this one!

1. In the pantomime, Jack’s widowed mother expected him to sell their cow for much needed money, but what did he come home with instead?
2. According to the Christmas carol, what should you deck your halls with?
3. What is the popular name for the succulent Schlumbergera?
4. You either love them or you hate them ..... which green vegetable is commonly served for Christmas dinner?
5. In another pantomime, which fruit containing an evil potion did Snow White eat, sending her to sleep for ever until a prince broke the spell with a kiss?
6. Which carol are you singing if you refuse to leave until your demands for pudding containing figs is fulfilled?
7. What is the popular name for Helleborus niger?
8. Complete the name of the white, scented Clematis cirrhosa ‘xxxxxx Bells’.
9. What is the second evergreen in the title of the carol ‘The Holly and the xxx’?
10. Which vegetable is commonly left out for Rudolf and his reindeer friends to eat?
11. Which sauce made from red berries often accompanies the Christmas turkey?
12. Don’t forget your supply of which parasitic plant for kissing under?!!!!

Answers to me by the January meeting in person, by email ([marion.keeley@btinternet.com](mailto:marion.keeley@btinternet.com)), or in the post (The Cottage, Fen End Farm, Oldwich Lane East, Fen End, Near Kenilworth, CV8 1NR) please.

### October Puzzle

**Answers** 1.Blackberries 2.Fungi 3.Asters 4.Rudbeckia 5.Pumpkins 6.Helenium 7.Colchicums 8.Sloes 9.Dahlias 10.Rosehips 11.Chestnuts 12.Crab Apples

**Entries** were received from Wendy Boulton, Mary & Edward Cotterrell, Sylvia Farley, David Felthouse, Helen Jones, and Gill Whitehead.

The winning entry pulled from the hat is Sylvia Farley who will receive a copy of the RHS magazine ‘The Garden’.

### Monthly Flower Spike & Pot Plant Competitions

#### Flower Spike

1. Carol Heginbotham (Alstroemeria ‘Indian Summer’)
2. Mary Cotterrell (Chrysanthemum)
3. Alison Watson (Clematis)

#### Pot Plant

1. Edward Cotterrell (Foliage Begonia)
2. Mary Cotterrell (Orchid)
3. Wendy Jenkinson (Coleus)