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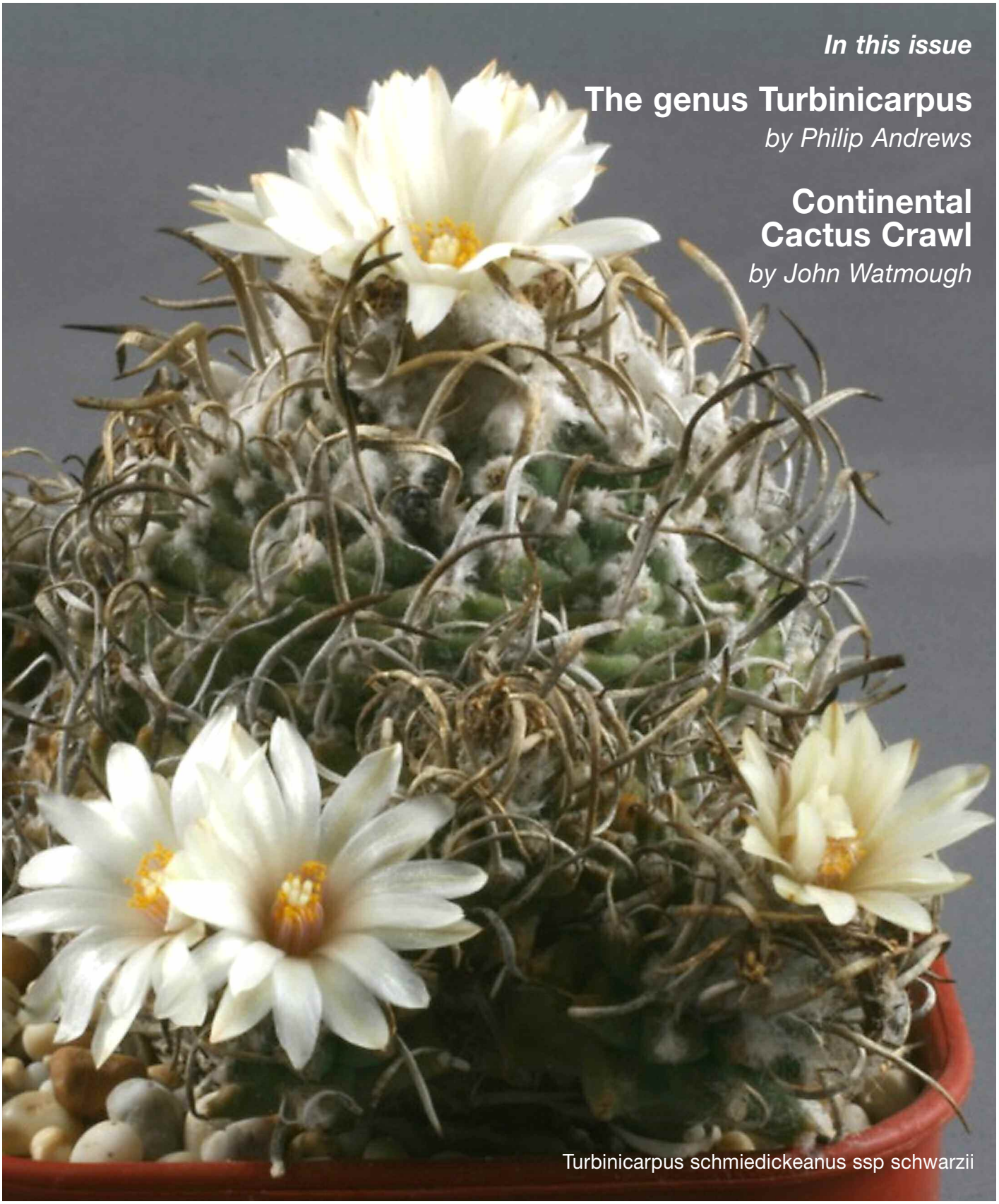

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Editorial

Welcome to the Essex Succulent Review.

With this June issue I have now completed one year of on-line Essex Succulent Reviews, which I hope my readers have enjoyed.

I have a number of people on my 'subscribers' list, to receive a pdf of each issue as it appears, and I know that others download it regularly from the website.

Please remember that a 'subscription' to the Essex Succulent Review is completely free. Just send me an email to the address below and I will add you to the notification list. You can stop this at any time simply by telling me to do so.

This is a good time to thank all the people who have helped me during the first year, by writing articles and providing pictures. And also thank you to people who have sent me such positive feedback – I really do appreciate everybody's support.

Sheila Cude

Essex **Succulent** Review

The Essex Succulent Review is published quarterly in March, June, September and December.

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Past issues are archived at www.zone15.bcss.org.uk/esr.html

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Lea Valley Show

23-25 May 2015

Above: Some of the Gymnocalyciums

Right: Best cactus in show – Stirling Baker's magnificent Melocactus

The Lea Valley Branch Show, held at the usual venue of Capel Manor, is always an enjoyable event. The Show takes place on the Saturday, and the plants remain on display over the bank holiday weekend. It is an ideal opportunity to attract interest from those visiting the gardens and the plant sales, of cacti, succulents and garden plants, always do well.

Zone 15 Events 2015

Saturday 6 June **11.00am–4.00pm**
Havering Branch Annual Show
North Romford Community Centre, Collier Row, Romford RM5 3QJ

Saturday 13 June **11.00am–4.00pm**
Southend-on-Sea Branch Show:
United Reformed Church Hall, Kings Road, Leigh-on-Sea SS0 8PP

Saturday 11 July **10.30am–4.00pm**
Waltham Forest Branch Show:
Chingford Horticultural Hall, Larkshall Road, Chingford E4 6PE
Plant sales from 9.00am

Saturday/Sunday 18/19 July **11.00am–4.00pm**
Zone 15 Annual Show **each day**
RHS Garden Hyde Hall, Creephedge Lane, Rettendon, Chelmsford, Essex CM3 8ET See the RHS Hyde Hall website for directions

Sunday/Monday 30/31 August **11.00am–6.00pm**
Havering Branch Sales at Harrow Lodge Park Show RM11 1JU

Saturday 5 September **12noon–5.00pm**
Havering Branch Sales at Orsett Show RM16 3JU

The genus Turbinicarpus

by Philip Andrews

A general view of just part of my Turbinicarpus collection

Cactus collecting started for me in 1961, when I was six years of age. My very first plant was purchased from Folkestone Woolworths costing me 2s-6d (12.5p). The plant was *Ferocactus herrerae,* it was in a 50mm pot and the size of a golf ball – 42 years on the plant is in a 375mm pot and is still growing well. I joined the Cactus and Succulent Society of Great Britain in 1969 and, with this newly-found source of information and contacts, my interest and knowledge rapidly increased.

My interest in cacti is as keen today as it ever was and now I have more than 1000 plants in my collection with a particular interest in Mexican miniatures such as Ariocarpus, Aztekium, Astrophytum etc. My particular passion however is Turbinicarpus. These are generally small and slow growing and can be a bit tricky to keep and grow well, which is their main attraction to me. I now have over 150 specimens, many of which were purchased in the 60s and are now over 50 years old.

Origin of the species

The name '*Turbinicarpus*' has a double origin of Greek and Latin:
Latin – 'turbo, turbines' – meaning 'top'
Greek – 'karpos' – meaning 'fruit'.

The earliest member of *Turbinicarpus* was first described in 1927 by Bödecker as *Echinocactus schmiedickeanus*. It was later included in the sub-genus *Turbinicarpus,* at this time a sub-genus of the genus S*trombocactus*. In 1937 *Turbinicarpus* was elevated to having its own genus. The genus

T. alonsoi

Distribution: the municipality of Xichu in the state of Guanajuato (Mexico)

This is a beautiful species and easily recognised. It is a relatively recent discovery by Alonso Garcia Luna, first described in 1996. The flowers are fairly large for the genus. It is relatively easy to grow so long as care is taken with the taproot.

T graminispinus

Distribution: Nuevo Leon (Mexico)

A recent discovery in 2008 this beautiful plant is now appearing in collections. The spines resemble dried grass. My small plants are now developing buds for the first time (during March) and I eagerly await the first flowers to appear. Unfortunately flower photos not quite available for this article!

T. knuthianus

Distribution: Guadalcazar in the state of San Luis Potosi (Mexico)

Turbinicarpus now includes species previously described under *Gymnocactus.*

Turbinicarpus populate the north-eastern regions of Mexico between 300-3300m. Species are usually confined to specific hostile habitats found in the following states: San Luis Potosi: Guanajuato: Nuevo Leon: Queretaro: Hidalgo: Coahuila: Tamaulipas and Zacatecas.

Turbinicarpus species grow in arid regions having a mean average rainfall of 300-600mm. They mostly grow on limestone soils, some on almost pure natural gypsum. Many species grow on sloping sites in cracks and niches. The plants' taproots act as an anchor in the loose stony soil, but more importantly a water store for periods of drought.

The species are generally small growing, depressed in the soil or level with the ground, and may prove difficult to spot until they flower.

The illustrations show some of my particular favourites, although it is difficult to make a shortlist as they are all terrific in their individual way. For a checklist of species see Turbinicarpus.

T. hoferi

Distribution: Aramberri in the state of Nuevo Leon (Mexico)

This was discovered in in 1988 by Anton Hofer. It is a particularly slow growing species often remaining solitary but may form a small clump in time.

T. lophophoroides

Distribution: Las Tablas in the state of San Luis Potosi (Mexico)

This is one of the more tricky species which should be grown slowly and watered with caution to prevent the plant becoming bloated and unnatural. The flowers are particularly large.

Cultivation notes

These are suggestions based on conditions experienced in the south of England.

Position and ventilation

Turbinicarpus prefer to be in a well-ventilated position in full sun to maintain a good body colour and spinal development. Ventilation should continue throughout the year; 24 hours a day during the warmer months and whenever weather permits during the colder months. .

Watering

The golden rule when it comes to watering *Turbinicarpus* species is 'never water when the compost is still damp'. Watering should commence late March to early April depending on the weather and the plants should initially be given a light spray to gently encourage them into growth. A number of species with papery spines (eg *Turbinicarpus schmiedickeanus*) have the ability to absorb water through their spines. Never introduce water too quickly as the plants may take up too much and split. During a hot mid-summer period the plants

T horripilus

Distribution: Metztitlan in the state of Hidalgo (Mexico)

Very colourful flowers and vicious spines make this an interesting plant. Will quickly form offsets and eventually a fairly large group.

T. pseudomacrochele ssp pseudomacrochele

Distribution: the states of Queretaro and Hidalgo (Mexico)

T. pseudomacrochele ssp lausseri

Distribution: the state of Queretaro (Mexico)

may go into dormancy for short time, when water levels should be reduced.

Temperature

Turbinicarpus species are all able to withstand high summer temperatures and indeed benefit, providing the heat is accompanied by good ventilation. Do not be tempted to overcrowd the plants, they will be far happier with a little space to allow the air to circulate.

Winter temperatures can be set ideally at 6°C but, providing the plants are kept dry and the humidity levels are low, they can happily withstand colder temperatures for brief periods.

Feeding

Do not over-feed! Over-feeding or over-watering will produce bloated unnatural looking plants looking nothing like the species in habitat. These are miniature plants and should therefore remain so. I endeavour to grow my plants to closely mimic their appearance in habitat. One liquid feed per year using a general cactus fertiliser applied during the spring is probably all that is needed.

Pests and diseases

From my experience *Turbinicarpus* species do not seem to be that susceptible to pests although I have experienced red spider mite and mealy bug over the years. The one disease that all *Turbinicarpus* species are susceptible to is rot, which can easily kill any plant within just a few days.

Repotting

Repotting is best carried out once every two/three years in early spring although this can actually be at any time of the year with caution.

I would recommend the following mix

2 parts John Innes No 2
(good quality as they do vary).

1 part Tesco low dust lightweight cat litter.

2 parts sharp horticultural grit
(small and larger size mixed).

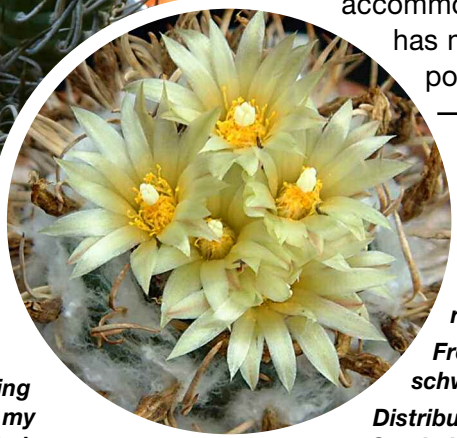
Some species benefit from the addition of a half part crushed gypsum.

Either clay or plastic pots can be used remembering clay pots will dry out more quickly. The majority of *Turbinicarpus* species will require a deep pot to accommodate the taproot once the plant has matured, up to this time shallow pots can be used.

Above: T. schmiedickeanus ssp schmiedickeanus

Distribution: La Perdida in the municipality of Miquihuana in the state of Tamaulipas (Mexico)

Like most Turbinicarpus this is a slow growing species. The plant in the photo has been in my collection since 1962 and is now multi headed.



Left: T. schmiedickeanus ssp flaviflorus

Distribution: Guadalcazar in the state of San Luis Potosi (Mexico)

A gorgeous plant, with yellow flowers. It grows quite tall over time and may require some support.

Front cover: T. schmiedickeanus ssp schwarzii

Distribution: Guadalcazar in the state of San Luis Potosi (Mexico)

T. pseudopectinatus

Distribution: Large distribution in the states of San Luis Potosi, Nuevo Leon and Tamaulipas (Mexico)

This species has similar characteristics to T. valdezianus with the flower buds developing over the winter months. It particularly benefits from being grown hard to ensure the plant remains compact, broad and flat to the compost surface, as you would expect to see the plant in habitat.

T. valdezianus

Distribution: Saltillo, Coahuila, Matehuala in the state of San Luis Potosi (Mexico)

A particular favourite of mine the plant shown has been in my collection since 1965. Then it was a small single head, now it has 14 heads but still occupies a 100mm pot. The buds first appear in November and slowly develop over the winter months to eventually flower in mid to late March.

Propagation

Fortunately the majority of the species are easily propagated from seed and success levels are generally good. Seedlings tend to grow away quite quickly and can produce flowering-sized plants within just a few years.

Use small pots with a 50:50 mixture of John Innes seedling compost:sharp sand. Water thoroughly with cooled boiled water and evenly spread the fine seed over the surface, there is no need to cover the seeds. Ensure everything – pots, compost, grit and water, have been sterilised before use. A microwave oven is the easiest way to sterilise the compost.

The pots are then sealed individually in polythene bags and put in a propagator or on a warm windowsill out of direct sunlight and kept around 21-25˚C but no higher than 30˚C until the seeds germinate. This should be within three weeks. Keep the plants covered until they are about 6-8mm high. When the seedlings are about 10mm high re-pot individually into 50mm pots and treat as adult plants. ■

Photos: Philip Andrews

Turbinicarpus hybrids

Under controlled conditions *Turbinicarpus* species will produce some interesting hybrids. The following photos are some examples in my own collection. All plants require the same cultivation as species.

T. beguinii x T. pseudopectinatus

T. pseudopectinatus x T. rioverdensis

T. klinkerianus x T. pseudopectinatus

Left:

T. valdezianus x T. bonatzii

Right:

T. valdezianus x T. laui

A sounding of silence

by David Offord

A few years ago I was paying a visit to the Organ Pipe National Monument in south Arizona, very close to the Mexican border. This was the third time I had visited the Monument and, although I did not know it, this was to be special.

I took one of the tour roads I had used before and selected a spot where I thought there would be photographic opportunities and parked up. Having walked a few hundred yards in a generally uphill direction I stopped and I was struck by how relatively cool it was and how many other hills with stands of giant cacti, Organ Pipe (*Stenocereus thurberi*) and Saguaro, were to be seen.

Then I noted something altogether different. I had, for the first time, left my cameras in the cool box of the car. I found a boulder some way from the road and took a seat. The environment was silent, so quiet in fact that I could hear the susurrations of the small shrubs and grasses in the soft breeze. More than this however, I could feel that this world was at peace with itself and all the elements were somehow in tune with each other and with my feelings.

The clouds passing slowly over the hills and the bright desert sun combined to put on an unforgettable display of light and shadow. Columns of ants busied themselves with their unceasing quests while overhead, birds flitted from one cactus lookout point to another.

Down on the edge of a trail leading from the road there emerged a family of Gamble's quail, the parents trotting along at each end of a string of young. They paused now and then to scratch and peck at the ground like miniature chickens, then made off, as if by some invisible signal, in the same formation as before. A little time passes.

Now a desert woodpecker decides that the ant nest a few yards from my feet provides a chance for delousing and, without noticing me, (or perhaps regarding me as no threat), proceeds to smear ants over several parts of his plumage. This is done in some haste as the ants resent the intrusion. The bird might wish he had not started his toilet if he took on hundreds of angry insects.

A tiny squeak a minute later has my eyes searching. In a few seconds I see a kangaroo rat bounding out from the cover of a mesquite tree and into the relative safety of a patch of thick dead grasses and the spines of fallen *Opuntia* pads. I wonder what caused this night-fellow to be about, and what was the cause of his panic.

Then, from behind a cholla, a road runner dashes to where the kangaroo rat vanished and proceeds to run round the patch of ground like a demented toy, stopping now and then to cock its head to listen for sounds of further movement. I see that its comic performance and apparent frustration are in fact a clever hunting tactic. It is running in a spiral pattern and, as it tightens the spiral, it hopes that its prey will panic again or at least give away its hiding place to give the bird a chance to run it down if it hops out some way from the stiletto beak. Nice try – but no lunch today. There is no movement and I think there must be a hidden hole under that grass. The runner takes off in a huff and scurry of gravel to hunt the

lizards it has seen basking on a boulder down hill from my vantage point. More time passes.

Gazing at the hills, and the sites of the arroyos and washes where water has flowed down after heavy rain, I can see how the heaviest congregations of organ pipes are found where the weather has delivered moisture and additional soil on the margins of the temporary watercourses. There also are found more of the nursery plants, under the shade of which the seedling cacti can mature without prematurely facing the full blast of a summer sun.

The pipes gently wave their tops when a warm convection wind plays upon them and, if you are close enough, then you can hear their creaking, rather like a ship's timbers. This is heard only when there is just the right amount of dehydration of the stems and that day somehow added to the feelings of unity with this wonderful place. Despite these rustlings the memory is still of blessed silence.

There were of course many other fine examples of Sonoran plant life, both cacti and other trees and shrubs, together with the annuals, some still in flower, to be admired.

A kind motorist has noted that my car has been unattended for over two hours and the park warden on his rounds, hearing this, attends, spies yours truly and shouts a welfare enquiry. A look into the sky shows the cause of concern. There are several vultures circling! Time to go, but with a fine and indelible memory of the wild places that I love.

If you feel tempted to explore do remember to take plenty of water with you. It will be needed. ■

Photos: David Offord

Chimeras

by Chris Coombes

In Greek mythology a chimera is described as 'a fire-breathing female monster with a lion's head, a goat's body and a serpent's tail'. An odd mixture of unrelated animals joined together to form something totally unique. Unfortunately for us weirdo lovers these things are not available in the shops!

The good news is that in botany some strange mixtures do occur. A botanic chimera is described as 'an organism, organ, or part consisting of two or more tissues of different genetic composition, produced as a result of grafting, or genetic engineering'. It is also described as a plant that 'contains a mixture of two or more dissimilar cell lineages, each of which retains its own genetic identity'.

In short then, two plants from different genera grafted together.

I am not going to discuss the 'lollipops', those highly coloured plants sold in their thousands in supermarkets and D.I.Y. stores, usually grafted on to an unsuitable stock that quickly dies as soon as the temperature drops. Here I am only interested in the real 'special' ones.

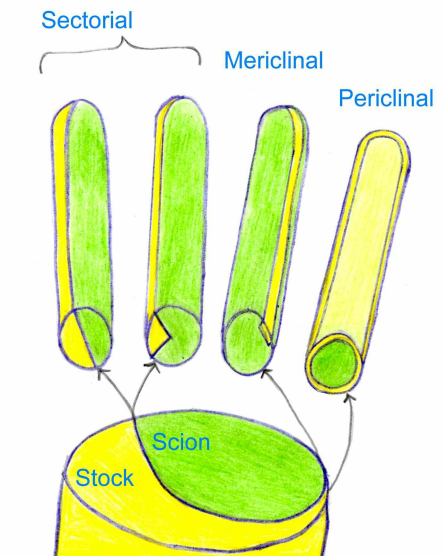
Some of the 'specials' have rebelled against the quaint coloured ornaments that we have forced

them to be and mixed themselves into real Frankenstein-like creations.

So how does this happen? The simplified version is this.

A plant's cell production, and therefore growth, starts from the apical bud or, if this is damaged, from an auxiliary bud. If, after grafting, a bud is formed at the union, in which tissues of both plants are present, then the resulting shoot will take on the generic properties of both and act accordingly.

A quick look at the following diagram explains this better.



As you can see, there are three types of chimeras which can be formed. The type depends on exactly where the bud union occurs.

A sectorial chimera occurs when several layers on the top of the growing point are positioned together forming a clear section of different cells.

A mericlinal chimera is formed when just a small layer along one side of the plant contains a different layer of genetic material.

The most important one is the periclinal chimera. This produces cell layers that cover the whole section of the apex forming a 'skin' over the other type of genetic material. The formation of one was documented in Gorden Rowley's book 'Teratopia'.

An *Uebelmannia pectinifera* was grafted on to an *Echinopsis* stock. After some years the stock started to rot, which spread to the scion. The plant was re-grafted on to a piece of *Cereus*. The plant continued to grow but, although it retained the colour and some features of the *Uebelmannia,* it had the form of an *Echinopsis*. This was a typical periclinal chimera in action with the plant having the *Uebelmannia* tissues overlaying the *Echinopsis* and displaying features of both.

The most important point to this is that when pups develop on plants of this type of chimera, they retain the genetics of both and are stable, thus a new type of plant is born!

This particular plant was given the name *+Uebelechinopsis*. The + indicates a non-sexual hybrid.

Many chimeras are real one-offs and others very difficult to source, but the more common types are usually available and can be purchased for a modest amount. Probably the most commonly-seen of these is *+Myrtyllocalycium* cv. 'Polyp' (*Myrtillocactus cochal* and *Gymnocalycium mihanovichii* cv. 'Red Hibotan'). This is easy to grow providing the red *Gymnocalycium* heads are trimmed back whenever they threaten to take over!

Chimeras are the rarest of the weirdoes and are plants that were never meant for this world. Some types form a kaleidoscope of colour; others create structural forms never seen before. These are the true aliens of the cactus world and for those of us that like some of our plants a little different, they are the ultimate in the remarkable world of adaptation, not just to their own particular environment but also to the meddling of humans.

Go on; give something really different a try… grow an alien. ■

Photo: Chris Coombes

Myrtyllocalycium cv. Polyp

My Aeonium diary

by Roger Mann

From the Canary Archipelago and the legendary 'Atlantis' come aeoniums. These sunny islands saw sailing ships of yesteryear visit for provisions on route to the four corners of the world and sailors spread aeoniums to the Americas and beyond. The name Aeonium is from the Greek 'aionos' meaning immortal.

The plants have been known in Europe since at least 1711 and, although they are endemic to the Canary Islands, some are found on the Cape Verde Islands and in Morocco, Yemen and East Africa. They are a member of the Crassulaceae and grown by many as pot plants or bedded out in warm climates.

The late Jack Catlin did some hybridising in America which is described in an article in the Cactus and Succulent Society of America's Journal Vol 65 No 5 (Sept/Oct1993), where it states that several of his creations have been offered by the ISI including 'Blushing Beauty', 'Cyclops', 'Garnet', 'Plum Purdy', 'Zwarkin' and many more. Lovely plants with great colour all of which I cherish.

Fig. 1 A. 'Voodoo'

Aeonium 'Voodoo' (Fig. 1) by Jack was released by the ISI in 2001 and its large sister seedling A. 'Cyclops' is another worthwhile beauty. I took several cuttings of A. 'Voodoo' last year which is a nice dark leaved plant that grows quickly for me.

Fig 2. A. 'Velour'

I bought seed of A. 'Nobile' from the BCSS in 2008, for 20p, and expect it to flower this year. I do wish that the BCSS would have *Aeonium* seed on offer again sometime. In the same year I acquired

Fig 3. A. 'Black Magic'

A. haworthii, 'Blushing Beauty' and 'Velour' (Fig. 2) and also A. 'Ballerina' which I bought at the BCSS National Show in August.

In 2009 seed of *A percarneum,* (Fig. 4) from the Sedum Society, sown 12/04/09 turned into beautiful lilac grey plants. This has pinkish flowers and is not common in cultivation. In habitat it is found only on Gran Canaria. Also from Sedum Society seed I have *A goochiae* which comes from La Palma and loves shade. Now in 2015 they are both big plants.

A. castello-paivae 'Suncap' is a nice variegate. It is an old known cultivar, but not stable. My A. 'Black Magic' (Fig 3, previous page) is made up of small cutie plants.
A. 'Lemon and Lime' is a good looker but slow for me while A. 'Garnet' is well worth growing for its rich red dark growth

Fig. 4 A. percarneum

Fig. 5 A. urbicum

A. glutinosum is from Portuguese Madeira, (where it will grow with naturalised opuntias) and has a stickiness about it. This is of special interest to me as I also grow carnivorous plants. This *Aeonium* grows in areas where nutrients are poor, so is it telling me something? Yes it does catch insects.

A. glandulosum, also from Madeira, is also sticky with bead glands around its leaf edges. It is said to be non-offsetting, but I sliced mine across the rosette and it has given me several pups. My plant is a lovely green but can colour on older leaves.

Fig. 7 A. simsii

Next is *A. simsii* (Fig. 7) with small highly toothed thin leaves – but beware of hybrids.

July of 2013 saw me buy two *A. urbicum* (Fig. 5) from Blueleaf Plants in Kent, which are getting taller by the minute. These are native to Tenerife and can reach six foot tall with pinkish flowers. Wow what a guy! Grown at home this needs plenty of feeding and regular repotting.

A. davidbramwellii is named in honour of a former head of the Botanic Gardens, Las Palmas de Gran Canaria. *A. volkerii*, which forms small shrubs up to 12 inches tall, was discovered in 1996 by Hernadez and Baudet in the Barranco de Antequera in the southwest of Tenerife.

Fig. 6 A. 'Goblin'

A. 'Red Edge' has green leaves with a nice red edge and has been available since 2012 from a Cornish nursery. Mine is a treat and a head turner.
Also from Cornwall is A. 'Pomegranate', bred in 2014, with a large central rosette and smaller pups, and A. 'Goblin' (Fig 6) which was released at The Royal Cornwall Show in June of 2014. A. 'Darley Blush' and A. 'Darley Giant' are from Abbey Brook, both nice plants.

Lots of lovely plants to grow! They can go out of doors in an English summer, depending on where you live, but certainly here in East Anglia and the south of England generally. All my plants go outside in May and enjoy the sunshine and when it rains they

get a wash. Winter is spent in a greenhouse heated to 40 F.

As for mealy bugs I use ant powder, it works for me.

My two Bibles are 'Aeonium in habitat and cultivation' by Rudolf Schulz and 'Succulent plants of the Canary Islands' by Joel Lode in which he gives details and pictures of 40 different aeoniums.

Fig. 8. A tabuliforme

During the summer months I go down to the greenhouse in the early morning and relax with a cup of Darjeeling tea to see the morning sunshine pass through the *Aeonium* leaves.

I am always interested to hear from other *Aeonium* growers but do not often come across them, which is a shame as I feel it is a neglected genus. ■

Photos: Bruce Arthy

How long will cactus seeds live?

by Joe Shaw

Cactus seeds are orthodox, which means that they can survive for a long time in the right conditions.

In habitat this has obvious advantages, since a seed can germinate when the best possible conditions arise naturally. However, cactus seeds in habitat are subjected to winter rains and summer heat, and they probably only live a few years. In cultivation, cactus seeds can survive for years if treated properly.

One rule of thumb for estimating the longevity of orthodox seeds, including cacti, takes moisture and temperature into consideration. For each 1% you can lower the amount of water in an orthodox seed, you can double its lifespan. Thus, a seed with 14% water, that is dried to 6% water, will live longer, by a factor of seven doublings. That is about a 125-fold increase in its lifetime. So if an orthodox seed would naturally survive for one year, then it will survive for 125 years if you dry it to 6% moisture content.

The other part of the rule states that orthodox seeds will double their lifespan for each 10°F (approx 5°C) that you lower their temperature. If seeds start out at 100°F (approx 38°C) and you drop the temperature to 90°F (approx 32°C), they will live twice as long. If you cool the seeds to just above freezing, their lifetimes will be increased by a factor of six doublings (about 60 years if their original life time would have been one year).

The really interesting thing is that the results seem multiplicative. If you performed the two operations above (lowering moisture and reducing temperature) you could increase the life of orthodox seeds by 125 x 60. That is 7,500! Theoretically, you can increase the longevity of orthodox seeds by thousands of years.

If you can keep dropping the temperature the seeds may be viable for tens of thousands of years. But, no one has done the experiment, so we do not really know. But, keep those cactus seeds cool and dry and they will last a long time. ■

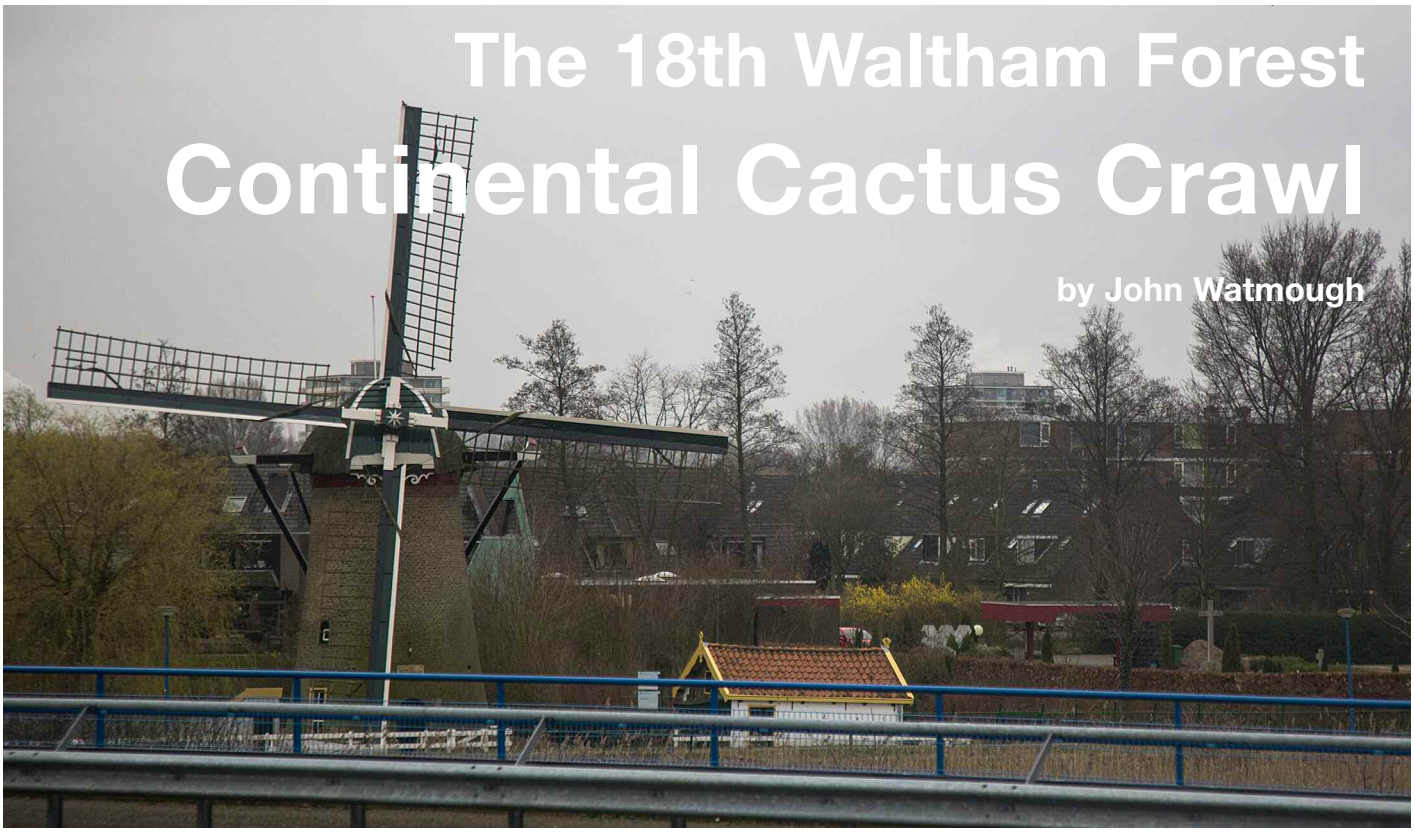
Photo: Barrel cactus fruits and seeds
desertortoisebotanicals.com

Editor's note

According to Wikipedia the oldest mature seed to have been successfully germinated was that of a Judean date palm, approximately 2,000 years old.

Even older were three seed embryos of the narrow-leaved campion (*Silene stenophylla*) from Siberia. Radio-carbon dating confirmed that they were approximately 31,800 ± 300 years old. See

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oldest_viable_seed



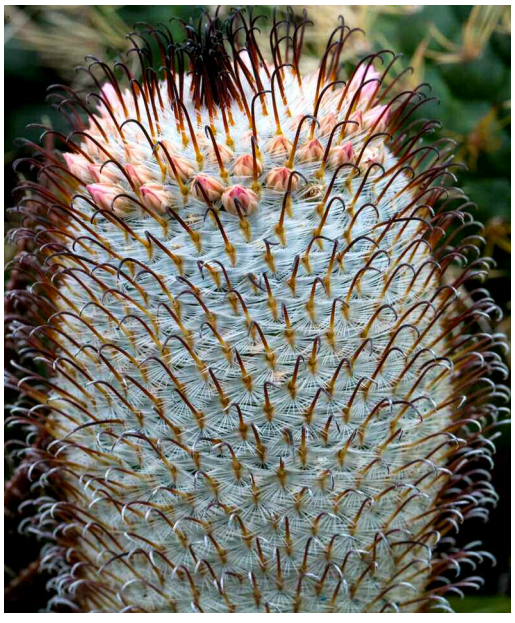
The 18th Waltham Forest Continental Cactus Crawl

by John Watmough

Thursday: Martin Doorbar and Your Correspondent (YC) rise at a time that is so early it is not marked on clocks. They circumnavigate the M25 in the rain and arrive at Chingford to find most of the party huddled in the Horticultural Hall. There is a big hooray when a Motts of Aylesbury coach arrives with Nicky our indispensable organiser and piloted by the imperturbable Trevor, (who knows what we are like but still consents to drive us). The coach, by the way, has been the star of a television series called 'On the coach'. The space between the heads and steerage was converted into a television studio. A legacy of the programme is that the notice in the dunnee 'Don't throw rubbish down the toilet bowl' is printed in Greek.

We are all sorry that Ian Armstrong cannot be with us; he has been carried off for an emergency operation the night before. We send our best wishes. Joyce allocates bums to seats and, as usual, YC tries to understand the sociological significance of her decisions. Martin and YC are separated, as in primary school. YC is in Alan Rollason's place as lavatory janitor. Stirling is near the back where the management can't hear him, (they still can). Barry is now at the very front where he can be kept under observation. Eddy has moved up a couple of places and is now among the civilised people in the front half. We are glad to welcome a number of new members, none of them rowdies. Packed lunches are eaten at 7:30am as on school outings.

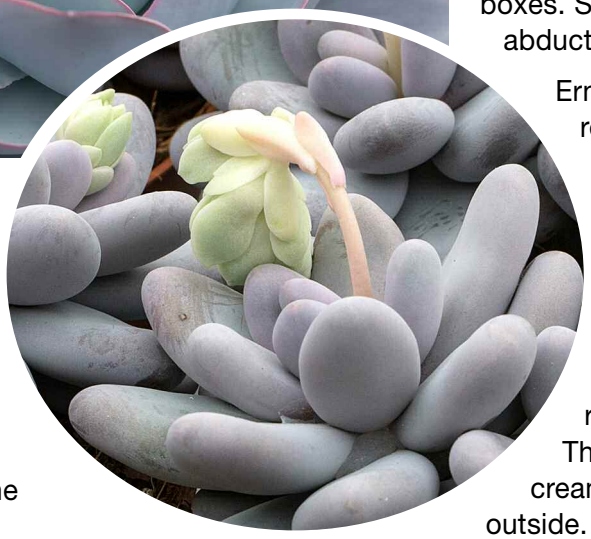
There is a pick-up on the Chelmsford Road, and another one at Ashford Passenger Terminal, then a short stop at the embarkation point for the Tunnel. In no time at all we are heading through France on our way to Decosters at Veurne, just into Belgium. In the past we have gone to Succulent Tissue Culture, but Rob Wellens has declared his establishment off-limits to visitors. Everybody can tell you why, but everybody's story is different, and it is unlikely that more than two explanations are correct. So we divert to Decosters, where the coach has to pass under a bridge one centimetre higher than the roof of the coach. The greenhouse is damp and more suitable to growing orchids, so not much is bought. Decoster very kindly gives us a huge *Agave* to help weigh the coach down while returning under the bridge.



A lovely Mammillaria at Decosters

The rain follows the coach as it has done all the way. It is a

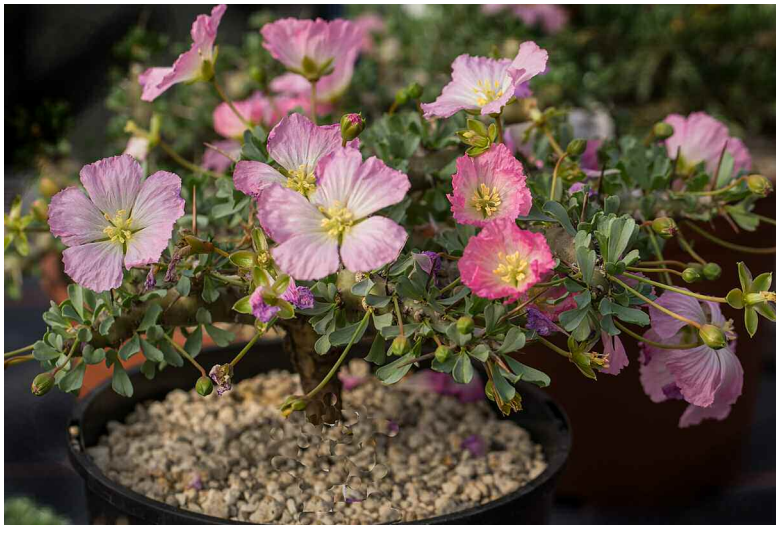
straight run to Dordrecht, so we are bound to arrive in time to sink several beers in the bar before dinner. Alas, it takes us 80 minutes to pass through the Kennedy tunnel under the Scheldt. There has been an incident – maybe an accident. There is certainly a precedent. But we arrive at the Postillion Hotel, Dordrecht, which is still surprisingly willing to have us, in a cheerful mood because John has just announced a 'round on the management'. The bar is still serving a choice between Heineken and Heineken.



Attractive succulents for sale

Freitag: So it must be Germany. As we cross the German border wallets are lubricated by the application of a spirituous liquor called 'Messerschmitt'. Trevor navigates the streets of Düren with admirable skill and deposits us at Piltz's. The luggage compartment is filled one layer deep, and we sit on the coach for three quarters of an hour without ever finding out what we are waiting for. So we are running a little late.

As usual we have to ring Specks when we arrive. It is always a surprise that Ernst and Marita do not live 24 hours on the premises. Some of us would, if we could. While we are waiting, one of our number drops a cardboard box into the Specks' perimeter ditch. This is the only piece of litter in the whole of Germany, and it is put there by a British tourist. Someone comments, sourly, that we should have brought two shopping trolleys and an old pram, then there would be some corner of a foreign ditch that is forever England. Near the entrance to the greenhouse there is a mammoth Madagascan *Euphorbia* (*E. capsaintemariensis* or similar), with a price tag consisting of a high digit and several zeroes. Some of us laugh, but somebody buys it, and it fills the sort of box that washing machines are packed in. After that all inhibitions are lost and James Gold fills several similar-sized boxes. Stirling is abducted as usual.



A Sarcocaulon at Specks

Ernst and Marita release Stirling outside Ingo Breuer's. New members are warned of the probability of pelvic damage from Ingo's rolling tables. There is still an ice cream parlour outside. Some members have an ice cream on the way in. Some members have an ice cream on the way out. Some have an ice cream on the way in and on the way out. It is a long drive before we get our compulsory ice cream dessert at the Postillion, to be washed down by a round on the management.

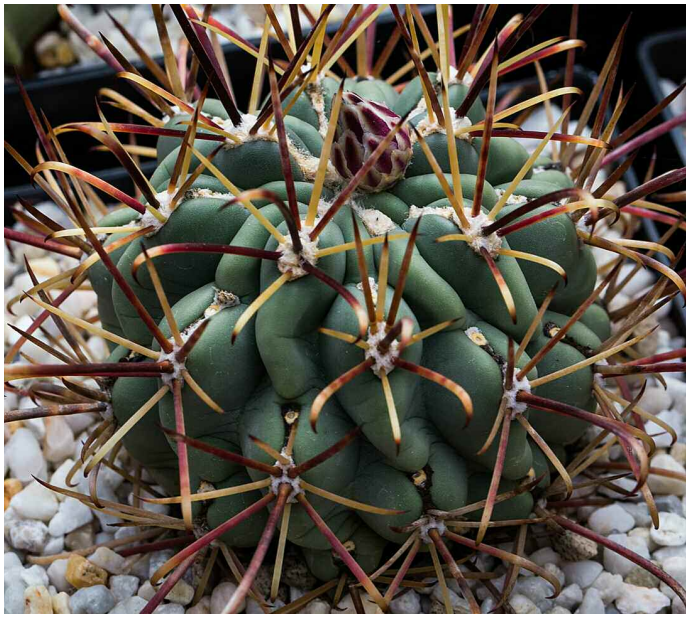
Back at the bar, enterprising persons have discovered that there is a secret stash of bottled Belgian beer. This doubtless accounts for a certain sluggishness and uncommunicativeness the next morning.

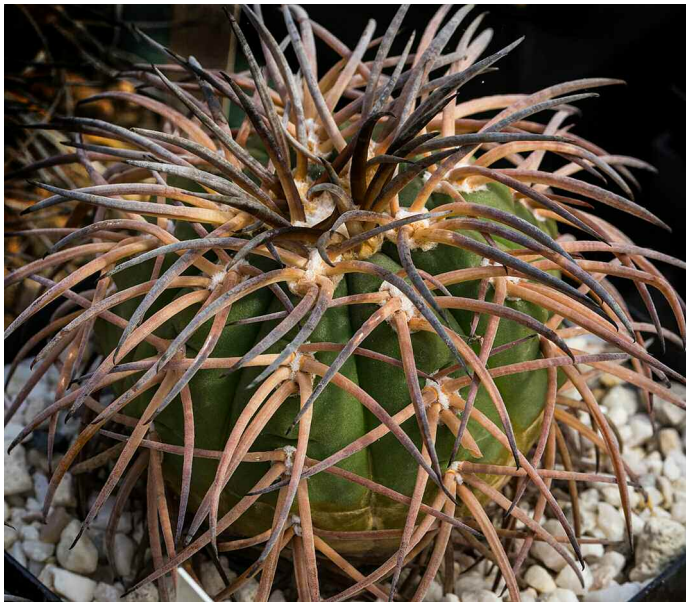
Zaterdag: It is not far to the glazed-in area near the Hook of Holland, so we make a leisurely start. With tremendous skill Trevor manoeuvres his 14-tonner past the radish factory alongside Jan Westeijn's wholesale nursery. Martin, who is determined this day to be first out of the coach on every occasion, rams the emergency door into an electric fence. Trevor wishes to ram Martin into the electric fence, but he is already sprinting round the nursery. There are two dogs

this year; the small dog shepherds everybody into the greenhouses and the large dog shows us where the exit is. Many euros are disbursed as there are lots of interesting plants, including hundreds of conos and some *Uebelmannia* seedlings.

The next stop is Van der Linden's. Some members are tempted by the sheer size of some of the specimens. There is an independently rented private sales area, specialising in huge succulents mostly of African origin. The usual suspects furnish themselves with plants of minimum beauty and maximum dimensions. Apart from that, not many plants are acquired. There are hardly any *Lithops* this year, and Eddy wanders about like a lost soul. The *Echeveria* paint shop is interesting though, wonderful, luminous colours!

Cok Grootscholten gives us a warm welcome, but he has a lot of empty space on his sales tables. Cactus lovers are disappointed, especially when they find that Martin has already sorted out all the variegated lophophoras. Regular members forget to hold their annual ceremony of remembrance round the trapdoor that Malcolm Pym fell through. Fortified by Cok and Ine's excellent coffee, we set off across country to Lexmond.





Cacti for sale at Pilz

At Two Shovels (Biesheuvels) Martin contrives to dismount from the coach in advance of the bearers of walking aids who traditionally lead the sprint. There are lots of plants with weird names, mostly grafted. But the cactus lovers are feeling deprived and are determined to spend the rest of their euros on something prickly and pricy. Meanwhile, other members are surreptitiously admiring Two Shovels' collection of size 20 clogs, and there is an attempt to organise a photograph of one of our members with both feet in one clog.

It is not far to Dordrecht so there is plenty of time to pack our plants. Yet again there is a round on the management. Stirling has organised a bottle of champagne to thank John and Joyce for all their wonderful work, not just on this tour but during the 18 years that they have been running it. Unusually nobody stays in the bar all night. There is a drunken and belligerent Geordie there – 'strong words, incoherently bawled' as the advert has it. And drinkers remember that we lose another hour overnight because of the change to summer time.

Dimanche: An argument about clocks, traditional on these tours, is interrupted by the appalling realisation that the coach is too small.

Van der Linden, wholesale nursery, including some of their larger sales plants!

The pile of boxes looks like the first stage of building the Giant Pyramid of Cheops. However, cactus growers are expert at packing three times as many plants into their greenhouses than they are designed to take. So, excluding Stuart Riley, the next two tallest men elect themselves to do the packing, this being Martin and Mark Plumer. A sour person says it is the same in the Royal Navy where all the tallest men are made to serve in the submarines. Anyway, would-be helpers are sent away with fleas in their ears, James is threatened with being made to run along behind the coach, and every cubic centimetre of the luggage compartment is filled except where Decoster's *Agave* is brandishing its spines. The packers do an effective job, because there are no plants in the aisle or in the toilet. But every spare seat is piled high, all the racks are packed solid, and there are boxes on people's laps. And there is plenty of time.

There is time, in fact, to have a proper lunch, eat ice cream, go to the chocolate factory, eat more ice cream, and try to find room on the coach for beer and chocolate bunnies. It starts to rain as we approach Calais, and we are early. Can we get moved on to an earlier train? Not on our cheap ticket, it seems. Nobody has firearms or nuclear materials this year, and we are all UK citizens, so there is nothing to hold us up at all. Except that Jean has forgotten her passport. Or perhaps it has been packed in the interior of the luggage compartment and she has been persuaded to say she has forgotten it. There is a bit of waiting, and form-filling, and telephoning, and searching of databases, and it is decided that there is nobody else remotely like Jean and anyway the French would not want her. So we are allowed to go straight on to the train and we do not have to waste time in the horrible passenger terminal. Hooray!

On the journey back through Kent, John thanks all those who have contributed to the 18 years of these Cactus Crawls. He even thanks Your Correspondent, though nobody can think why. Everybody thanks

A selection of the Astrophytum for sale at Biesheuvels (Two Shovels)

John and Joyce for all the enjoyment they have given us through the years, then Nicky for his impeccable organisation, and Trevor for his professional skills and his patience.

Fond farewells.

End of an era. ■

Photos: David Traish