

# In my greenhouse

Peter Cowdell

Layout by Christian Bohm



Fig. 1 The author in his greenhouse

I first started growing cacti and succulents aged between eight and eleven. My grandmother had a greenhouse where she used to grow tomatoes and she also loved cacti, especially *Echinopsis* species. After she passed away and work life intervened, with careers in sales and as a mining mechanical engineer, it was quite a few years before I got back into the hobby again after a mining accident, and my present collection was started around about 1992. My first plant was, of course, an *Echinopsis* as granny used to take offsets from her plants for me to grow on.

Currently I have a Woodpecker cedar greenhouse 9×19ft (2.7×5.8m) which does not go below 5°C (41°F) during winter. The beauty of using Western Red Cedar (*Thuja plicata*) is that it is a timber renowned for its outstanding physical properties. Western Red Cedar produces



Fig. 2 Inside view of the Woodpecker cedar greenhouse





Fig. 3 *Echinopsis* hybrids



Fig. 5 Mostly *Echinopsis*

oils that act as preservatives to protect the wood from insect attacks and decay, and its ability to produce such preservatives increase with age, allowing the wood to withstand years of use. In addition it is a very stable wood that lies flat and stays straight. Compared to other woods, it boasts a very low shrinkage value, which makes it ideal for use in high-moisture areas. Also its cellular structure creates interior air spaces that give it an insulation value higher than most woods and it tends to stay warmer in the winter. There is also a 10×8ft (3×2.4m) double-glazed hothouse, kept at 10°C (50°F) minimum, and a Rhino

Green 6×10ft (1.8×3m) which contains hardier plants and is kept just frost free (Fig. 4). In addition there is an Alton hexagon-shaped greenhouse at the bottom of the garden which belongs to my wife Michelle and is used by her for bedding plants, though I am able to store some cacti and rooting offsets in there over the winter.

The large Woodpecker (Figs. 2 & 7) is heated by side-mounted tubular heaters which are rated at 280 watts. However if temperatures drop below 2°C (35°F) then a 2KW heater kicks in. Fortunately I have solar panels on the house so that heating costs for the winter are low, as



Fig. 4 The Rhino Green greenhouse and board with BCSS Information Pack sheets





Fig. 6 *Rebutia* 'Apricot Ice'

long as the sun shines. As the garden and consequently the greenhouses are sheltered by tall hedges and neighbouring houses it is rare that temperatures get very cold and I reckon that 80% of the time the heat from the tubes is enough. All the greenhouses have power in them and lighting as well as fans for circulating the air around, and it is possible to gather inside the Woodpecker during the evenings, admiring the plants and eating a fish and chips supper.

My main interest is in *Echinopsis* hybrids (Figs. 3 & 5) and I have a full collection of Schick hybrids (Figs. 13–16). This all began when I joined the 'Echinopsis Swap Circle' which

was started by Elizabeth Pendleton and had up to 50 members at one time. The Circle is not running any longer although many of the members keep in touch with each other. I also have many hybrids from Abbey Brook and a few other places. In total I suppose I have over 790 different *Echinopsis* plants. I also have a good mixture of many other genera of cacti and succulents. The hothouse contains *Melocactus*, *Uebelmannia*, *Euphorbia* and stapeliads among others. The cold greenhouse is full of *Tephrocactus*, *Echinocereus*, *Rebutia* (*Aylosteria*) and others. My favourite plant is an Abbey Brook hybrid *Echinopsis* called 'Loganberry Pete', which was actually named for me in 2008. (Ask me for the full story.)



Fig. 7 Exterior view of the main greenhouse



Fig. 8 Mexican flag and information board





Fig. 9 (from top) A display of cacti and succulents in the 'hothouse'

Fig. 10 *Lithops* section

Fig. 11 General view with rebutias and chamaelobivias



My main sources of plants in recent years have been Brian Fearn at Abbey Brook, Doug Sizmur of Kent Cacti, Gordon Foster at Oakdene, Southfield Nursery and Craig Barber of William's Cactus. As well as purchasing from these respectable nurserymen, they have also given me large quantities of free plants which I have used as give-aways to youth groups such as Cub Scouts, Army Cadets, school children and other visitors (see below). There is work in progress trying to attract Sea Cadets, Girl Guides and other schools, but the Scouts are the biggest priority group as they number 9,000 in the Yorkshire area alone.

My basic potting mix these days is John Innes No 2 with up to half the mix being inert substances such as chick grit, cat litter and Perlite. For South American cacti which are 'acid lovers' I use John Innes ericaceous compost which is lime-free. This was a tip from Dr Brian Scott, a prominent figure at Sheffield Branch, an experienced grower and someone who has donated many plants for giving away to new and younger visitors and members. I use Chempak No 8 as my main fertiliser and the *Echinopsis* receive this with every other watering during the growing period. The other plants get it once a month. Very young plants of *Echinopsis* hybrids are watered with Phostrogen all-purpose fertiliser (which is higher in nitrogen) to give them a boost.

The main greenhouse was purpose-built so that I could use it for educational purposes and for inviting youth groups, visitors, new members and other interested parties to see a cactus collection and hopefully become smitten and eventually join the Society. It was my mother's last wish and the money to build it came from her estate when she passed away. It is just two years old. It is particularly useful for getting new members involved, so for example someone who has attended a Branch show and joined up to the Society. As well as attending Branch meetings I like to get them involved by inviting them to see my collection, give them free plants and cuttings, and take them over to the nearby William's Cactus nursery where again they are able to see a wider range of cacti and succulents in the flesh than they would come across during a regular Branch meeting. One thing we learned the hard way was that when you have signed up new members at a show, it is vital to have an exciting talk on stunning cacti for the very next Branch meeting, and not a talk about *Aeonium* which is what was in the programme one year. Nothing wrong with aeoniums but for somebody attending their first meeting it might just be enough to put them off for good!

In order to make the greenhouse look smart for visitors as well as meeting Health and Safety requirements for youth groups, I had to fit it out with these factors in mind. Executive grade vinyl flooring (easy to keep clean) and white painted staging all gives a good impression as well





Fig. 12 Potting shed with fun and informative notices and pictures

as being practical. Safety is paramount for kids visiting and things such as first aid kits, eye-wash stations, fire extinguishers and signs, signs, signs everywhere are essential. School teachers and Scout leaders visited to check all safety features before children were allowed to visit. The fire brigade offered advice on fire risks. As the greenhouse is single entry - one door only, it means that a maximum of five children are allowed inside at any one time.

Other fun things are often rolled out for visitors. A length of red carpet is used for newcomers as a welcome gesture. Yellow ribbons, a large Mexican flag (Fig. 8) blows in the breeze in the garden, Cactus Pete board signs (a large 4ft high cactus cut-out with a hat) and a large free-standing wooden notice board covered with BCSS Information Pack sheets stands on the lawn. In the potting and education shed (Fig. 12) there are pictures, cartoons, drawings and above all, information notes pinned to the walls. And of course everyone receives a free plant or two (Fig. 17).

As well as schoolchildren, I have had Cub Scouts visiting and have recently made contacts with regional and area Scout Commissioners with a view to increasing the number of visitors. With adults I have recently invited visitors who attended our Branch Show, four dentists' receptionists, and I even tried to sell an Information Pack to the lady who



Fig. 13 Schick hybrid No 8 – 'Cheetah'





Fig. 14 (from top) Schick hybrid No 10 – ‘Oaxaca’

Fig. 15 Schick hybrid No 11 – ‘Tempress’

Fig. 16 Schick hybrid No 12 – ‘Djinni’

Fig. 17 Tray of rooted offsets to be given away to Cubs and Scouts



delivers our morning paper. Everyone is welcome to visit: just be sure to contact me first to make arrangements. (See contact details below.) Once you have visited then you too can become a ‘BELIEVER’. As you can see from some of the photos, there are signs saying ‘BELIEVE’ just about everywhere, and this is my keyword. I truly believe that we can grow people as well as plants and by using my greenhouse as a resource for visitors to see the plants and appreciate them I can try to bring the Society and its activities to the notice of the wider public as well as to stimulate the interest amongst younger people.

Finally I would like to mention the support I have had from other Branch members who have helped me with displays, visitors and events and activities such as painting and maintaining props such as the huge notice board (Fig. 4), as well as lifting and moving them as I have spine and neck issues resulting from my accident. I would particularly like to mention Robert Potts, one of the Branch’s youngest members who has helped me so much on various trips, events and selling information packs at shows. Last but not least I wish to acknowledge my wife Michelle, who has put up with me and supported me during my time in the hobby. As well as having her own succulent interests – she grows *Haworthia* and *Lithops* – she welcomes visitors and keeps them hydrated as well as helping me to move and lift and transport myself and plants around. I could certainly not manage without her understanding, patience and support.

Email: [petercowdell@sky.com](mailto:petercowdell@sky.com)

Phone: 01709 584393 (Leave a message if no reply.)

Photos by Al Laius.

