



Presidents Message

Hang in there everyone only a few months of winter fun left. It sure has thrown everything at us this year. On the positive side, there have been some of the most picturesque snowstorms in memory and a spectacle of beauty to view in the moments before shoveling.

Ignoring the snow squalls and sub zero temps on the other side of the window, our plants snuggle into their pots beginning their own indoor rendition of the spring is coming. Many gesneriad growers at this time of year have a wonderful selection of show plants groomed and ready, putting on the final bit of growth for the forming buds which will be timed perfectly. Are you going to show a plant(s) this year? If you are even just thinking of it, don't hesitate to ask for advice to any of us around you.

As I keep saying every month, the spring shows are almost upon us. The Toronto Gesneriad Spring Show, "GESNERIADS: NATURE'S OBSESSION", is only a month and a half away. Whether warm, cold, rain, snowstorm, or even sunshine I can't wait to get my view of the spring Gesneriad oasis at Sherway Gardens on March 29th. If you haven't seen it before you should take

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the time to stop by as it is a great one stop view of many different varieties of well grown gesneriads. It is also a great place to find new plant material that you may have been looking for and not found yet.

There is still almost three months until our first annual spring plant exhibition. It may seem like a long time away but it too will be upon us in a blink. Give a little extra TLC to those plants you might think are the ones you will want to bring and show off to the local masses.

Stay warm and grow well. Fingers crossed for good driving weather next weekend! ☺

Bevin Anderson

Our Visit to Harster Greenhouses

In November, members of the club visited Harster Greenhouses in Dundas, Ontario, and were treated to an insider's view of how millions of picture-perfect plants are produced each year. The greenhouses were founded in 1976 by Andre Harster. They cover seven acres of land, and the production of over ten million plants per year makes it one of North America's largest producers of quality African Violets. I think it's fair to say that we were all stunned by the expanse of the buildings, and the sophistication of the equipment used. To put it mildly, the impact of seeing thousands of violets all in bloom in this immaculately clean and well-ordered facility was quite breathtaking.



Although they do produce other types of plants on a more limited basis, Harster specializes in producing African Violets; they grow more than 100 varieties, all of which are named. These plants are hybridized in their own laboratory, using the latest tissue culture technology.

Mass-marketing has pushed the industry towards new standards. Plants have to be all the same size, with a large bloom count, centred in a “bouquet” of flowers. Production is rigorously controlled, from propagation to the finished product. Quality control protocols have been established at every stage of the plant’s growth, and any that do not meet the criteria are eliminated before reaching the final production stage. Delivery of plants throughout North America is carried out by the company’s own fleet of temperature-controlled trucks, enabling Harster to produce and deliver plants throughout the year.

The laboratory where the tissue culture is performed is in a separate building, and we were not able to enter that particular area due to the strict conditions which must be observed to keep the premises sterile and absolutely bacteria-free. To give you some idea of just what goes on in the lab: Members of our club might put down a leaf with the object of producing two or three plantlets. Harster takes a thoroughly sterilized leaf, which is then cut into approximately ten pieces. These pieces are then placed in a flask with agar as the nutrient. This one leaf will produce approximately 500 plantlets.

Apart from the beautiful plants they produce, we were all amazed at the automated equipment in the Harster facility. As soon as they reach a specific size, plantlets are placed in four or five-inch pots (no gradual increases here). State of the art equipment is used to fill those pots with a peat-based mixture, and the plantlets are inserted manually (the only time the plants are handled by their human caretakers). Once the plant is in place, an overhead clamp picks up the pot and places it on a huge aluminum tray; each tray holds 500 plants. A computer program recognizes when each tray is filled, and it is moved to the growing area.

Plants are watered by a sophisticated automatic system that floods trays with fertilized, temperature-controlled water. After a short period, the system drains the tray, ensuring that plants are not left standing in water. As the plants mature, the fertilizer level is automatically adjusted by this same computerized program to ensure optimum and even growth.

When the plants are ready to be shipped, each 500 plant tray is moved to the shipping area. There, an overhead clamp lifts plants individually, and places them in cardboard shipping boxes which have been assembled by special machines on the premises. The boxes then roll on conveyor belts to the waiting trucks. Without seeing this with your own eyes, it is perhaps difficult to imagine the precision of the specialized equipment in this facility. It’s truly 21st century technology at its amazing best.

It is also worth noting that Harster uses its corporate website to encourage hobby growers to join the African Violet Society of Canada, as well as the African Violet Society of America.

All in all, our field trip was an entertaining, educational experience. Those of us who were on hand will certainly never look at those colorful plants in the nursery and garden centre quite the same way again!

Submitted by
Ray Morrison

Last Month's Meeting News – Sunday, January 20, 2008

Eleven members were present. President, Bevin Anderson, welcomed new member, Rodger Tschanz.

The copies of How to Know and Grow Gesneriads (a publication of The Gesneriad Society) have arrived. Copies were given to members who currently don't own a copy. Note was made of members not present who do not own a copy, so that a copy can be set aside for them.

Monte Watler asked for members to consider writing articles for the newsletter.

Show and Tell:

Judy Zinni showed seedlings of *Haberlea rhodopensis*, approximately one-year old. Ray Morrison showed a small plant of *Sinningia douglasii* (pink). Paul Lee explained that he has improved his furnace in his house and this has had a beneficial effect on the plants. Bevin Anderson's plants have suffered with the changes to his growing room. Chris Wong asked when to transplant small *Streptocarpus* plants propagated from leaf cuttings – members explained that the baby plants can be separated from the parent leaf when baby-fingernail size. Chris mentioned that they had rolled a *Kohleria* to stimulate more compact growth. For the benefit of new members, Bevin Anderson showed some photos of the rolling method for *Kohleria*.

Ray Morrison and Paul Lee brought some plants for sale. There were several selections of British-bred *Streptocarpus*. Information about the donated plants was given by the donors.

It was announced that the March 2008 speaker is planned to be Carolyn Conlin-Lane. Members were asked which presentation they would prefer from her listing of presentations. It was decided that the presentation would be on *Chiritas*, which is a specialty of hers.

Today's meeting presentation was *Alpine and Cool-Growing Gesneriads*, a PowerPoint presentation by The Gesneriad Society, with narration by Bevin Anderson.

Respectfully submitted,
Judy Zinni
Secretary

OGS Executive*

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* Executive positions are still available for members (current or joining) that want to get actively involved.

Visit our website at: www.ontariogs.org

For questions about meetings, the website or additions for our monthly newsletter email us at indoorgrowing@ontariogs.org or feel free to contact any of the executive members.



Winter can be beautiful, but very often that same beautiful snow can prevent us from getting to several winter meetings. It is always enjoyable to see blooming gesneriads in the depths of winter. Our old house has a stone foundation cellar, not suitable for use other than the furnace and storage. So, my plant room is in an insulated section of the garage... Who ever puts cars in the garage anyway? This winter has been a good one for lots of bloom on seedlings and other plants.

Most of my larger *Sinningia* (that I grow outside) are now in dormancy, stored under a bottom shelf in the garage plant room. One of the species, *S. conspicua*, decided to do a second round of sprouting, so I have kept it watered and out in the lights. It has wonderful yellow flowers, and they were right on time to be used in hybridizing with the many eumorpha-type sinns that have also been blooming at the same time. I have used it for pollen and have put other pollen on it. Once pollinated, a gesneriad usually soon drops the corolla, so I am quick to take my photographs before I start the hybridizing! It would be great to introduce more yellow into my *Sinningia*.

Other gesneriads have been blooming too. I have a *Kohleria* seedling from a few years back, that has decided to put on a good show this year. Other years it has struggled due to my neglect. It is a good thing they produce those back-up rhizomes! I always name promising seedlings for my own identification, as names are easier for me to remember than ID numbers such as Koh/04-03. This one, I have been calling 'Pink Panther', but I need to check and see if that name is already in use.

Although *Episcia* blooms are not all that exciting, it is nice when the *Episcia* seedlings start to take on their different foliage colours. As tiny seedlings they all look the same. They can, however, still change their look even after six months. This seedling I have named 'Huron Tract'. It is a cross between 'Suomi' and my old hybrid from the mid-80s 'Huron Holiday'. Again, the naming is for my records, and it is still too soon to know if this will be worth

propagating as a named variety.

With a little luck from the weather department, I hope to get down to the February meeting and perhaps bring along some starters of this *Episcia* and the *Kohleria*. It is also good back-up to have others growing the plants.



Genus Spotlight – Episcia

My Passion for Episcia!

(Reprinted with permission From the February 2004, Volume 28 – Number 2 Issue of the TGS Newsletter)



Pictured above -Episcia 'Huronian Tract' offspring from a cross of 'Huronian Holiday' (hybridized and grown by John Beaulieu)

Those of us who grow gesneriads are blessed in a multitude of ways, not least because of the incredible variety of plants with which we can surround ourselves. After a year or two spent in the company of these leafy charmers, most of us will admit to having a favourite 'member of the family'.

In my case, it's Episcia, those showy, colourful individuals grown not (or at least, rarely) for their blooms, but for their magnificent foliage. My Passion for Episcia really began as the result of a struggle with a plant room that grew unbearably warm during the summer months. My streps wilted and went into a deep gloom, and even my Saintpaulia were only content on the lowest shelves of the plant stands. In desperation, I plunked the half-dozen Episcia I owned at the time onto the uppermost shelves and watched in amazement as they reveled in the heat and humidity.

Here, as far as they were concerned, was heaven. They grew like weeds, they bloomed, they threw stolons left, right and centre, with embarrassingly little effort on my part. Boy was I hooked. Before long, other varieties were joining my original group on the stand...lots of others. From there, one shelf became two, and soon the Episcia were bodily shoving everything else out of their way. Their enthusiasm for life was heart-warming to a novice who had been responsible for a depressing number of horticultural homicides. It was all a tremendous boost for the ego.

So when I moved my plant growing space from that upstairs bedroom down to the basement of our home a year ago, I made certain that I could still provide the conditions that my Episcia babies loved. The most crucial thing: warmth. Some members of the gesneriad clan can tolerate cool temperatures: Episcia absolutely loathe the cold, and will not thank you for any day or night when the mercury dips below 65 degrees F. They would prefer 70 degrees (actually, they think 80 degrees is swell, but that's another story). Bottom line: The warmer your growing space, the better for your Episcia. Warm temperatures will also help to ensure that the extra humidity you provide will not create ideal conditions for growing something else: powdery mildew. If all else fails, grow Episcia only on the top shelves of your plant stands, where temperatures will be highest.

In order to increase the humidity surrounding them, I set my pots of Episcia on trays that are lined with pebbles (aquarium gravel, actually). I don't pour any amount of water into the gravel, just a splash here and there when I'm watering the plants to raise the humidity. As far as 'watering is concerned, use tepid or even slightly warm water...they love it. No gesneriad appreciates cold water (although the magnificent streps Paul Lee grows in his greenhouse would suggest otherwise), but again with Episcia, warmth is the key word. Feeding is pretty straightforward. I just use the standard quarter of a teaspoon of 20-20-20 to a 4-litre jug

of water as their 'regular' diet. Once a month or so, I give them a change of pace with a little bit of fish emulsion instead, along with a drop of 'Super Thrive'. I'm not sure that they really care that much, but it makes me feel virtuous.

My Episcia are grown under two tubes, one wide spectrum and one cool white, with the timers set for 12 hours per day. Jim Bodnar (who has forgotten more about Episcia than I will ever know), tells me that setting the plants a bit closer to the tubes will develop deeper and more vibrant colour in the foliage, as will growing the plants under four tubes (which I haven't yet tried).

Reproducing Episcia is far too simple, I regret to say, which is why those of you who love them are invariably swimming in the little darlings. Simply remove a stolon from the plant of your choice when it's a size you feel comfortable handling, cut the stem to a length of about one-and-a-half inches (I prefer to keep them short), then place into a nice little divot you've made in a solo cup filled with moist potting mix. And that, I'm afraid, is it...no need to cover them. It's all so simple, which is where the trouble lies, of course. Episcia, Episcia, everywhere...If by some chance you have a plant that stubbornly refuses to present you with any stolons, you may take a cutting and proceed in the same manner. In most cases, stolons will root and grow into a nice little starter plant with astonishing speed -- four to six weeks, in fact. If you're growing for show, it's essential to pot them up regularly. With large growers, that may mean re-potting every month. Potting several youngsters together in one container is also a good method if you're looking for a full, lush effect. Personally, I have found that most Episcia varieties aren't fond of really shallow pots, preferring a bit more depth of soil for their root system. But this is something each grower should experiment with a bit.

It's important to note that individual Episcia don't live forever. In fact, they really can't even be called long-lived. I rarely have a plant in my growing room that's much more than a year old. I do however, have its children and grandchildren; that lack of longevity is one very legitimate reason to keep on propagating! I'm relieved to say that, so far at least, I've experienced few culture problems as far as Episcia are concerned. (I firmly believe this is due to growing conditions, rather than expertise). There's no question that certain varieties (such as the yellow-flowered 'Suomi') seem to resent being handled more than necessary. Some varieties, like 'Tropical Topaz' has leaves which often turn yellow for no apparent reason.

At present, I grow about 50 varieties of Episcia, including the one that started it all: "Ronnie," which was obtained from the sales table at the TGS Show in 2002, and had been donated by John Duncan. (In fact, the plant was unidentified when purchased, and lived with John's name emblazoned on its pot until Olive Ma Robinson kindly identified one of its offspring that had taken up residence with John and Doris Brownlie). 'Ronnie' is a great Episcia for a beginner: a happy sort, who will grow very large with very little encouragement. Other early acquisitions made through the Brownlies, include Strawberry Patch, Kee Wee, and Pink Acajou, all very attractive and co-operative growers.

In the past year, I've been very pleased with a red called 'Alyce's Aussie,' and several other varieties including Plum Country and Coco (all acquired from Paul Sorano of Lyndon Lyon Greenhouses). I'm pleased to say, however, that nearly all of my very favourite varieties happen to be Canadian hybrids. These include **Huronian Holiday, a wonderful older red produced by John Beaulieu**, and several magnificent varieties hybridized by our very own Jim Bodnar, whose love for these beauties is limitless. My top pick of the Bodnar group is Jim's Green Acres. After a hiatus, Jim has begun hybridizing again, and two of his new introductions look awesome: Jim's Pink Rose and Jim's Moon Rock. So watch for those.

There's no question that, as with any of the gesneriads, each grower must find what performs best for them. While I love 'Tiger Stripe', I can't grow it nearly as well as can Nancy Ley. I've thrown in the towel on Panama White, because it steadfastly refused to bloom for me, although I know darn well that it bloomed beautifully for John Duncan. I've also cut back on my 'pinks,' varieties like Cleopatra and Moonlight Valley. They are beautiful, but they are best when grown under a dome or in an enclosure, and I just feel the need to be more intimate with my plants. How can I pester them if they're not out in the open with me?

As with any gesneriads, the bottom line is the same: Grow the varieties that do well for you in your conditions, and say a fond farewell to those that refuse to co-operate. But if you don't have any Episcia on your shelves, do try at least a couple. Those rich, warm colours go a long way toward brightening winter days.

By Sharon Kemp

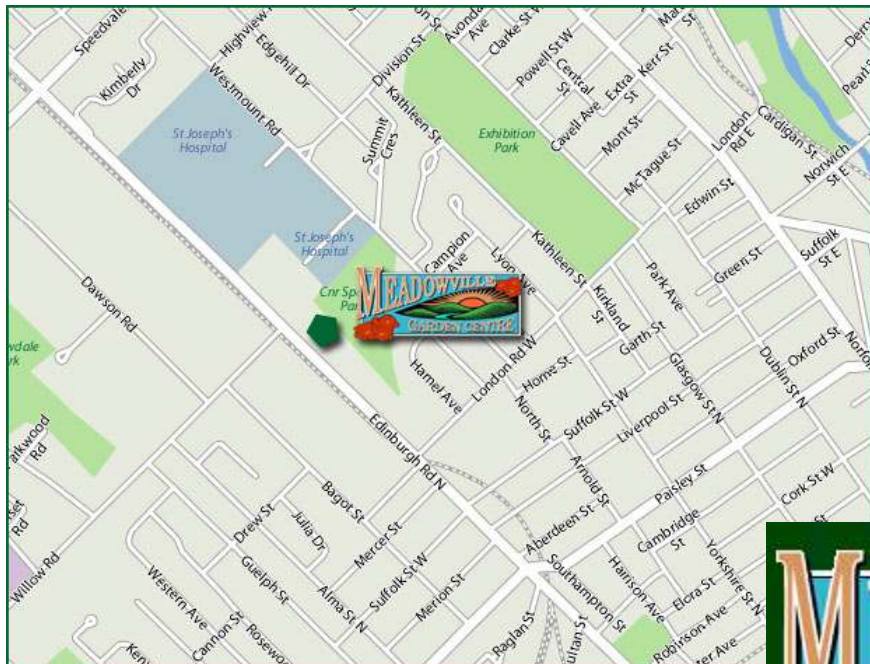
February meeting reminder!

Our next meeting will be on Sunday February 17th. We have had a topic change as our editor and president has been battling computer upgrades and unable to complete the Columnea presentation as planned. In its place I have planned a demo for us to get our hands dirty. I have been growing many different species of Streptocarpus from leaf over the winter and we can use them as an example and practice with them. I will also bring some alpine seedlings to share which we can pot up at the same time.

(Solo pots and soil will be available for use, please feel free to bring you favourite soil if you would like.)

Remember to bring plants for show and tell and any extra little plantlets you may want to share.

We look forward to seeing you there!!!



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