

The Larry Leach Collection at the University of Limpopo

by Rolf Becker & Alma Moller

The name Larry Leach is well known to all with an interest in southern African *Euphorbia*, *Stapelia* and *Aloe* species and his voluminous contributions to the succulent biology of our region are well documented. For more than four decades, until his passing in 1996, at age 86, Leslie Charles Leach worked passionately and tirelessly to describe many species in those genera.

His multitude of contributions amounted to some 100 scientific papers which included the description of over 90 *Euphorbia* names. In addition, his revisionary works on *Aloe* and *Stapeliaeae* led to the description of numerous new taxa. While at times somewhat controversial, Larry Leach was universally recognized as an excellent botanist and received numerous awards from learned botanical societies. He was also highly regarded by his peers, as can be inferred from the impressive list of plant names that commemorate him. These are:

- *Aloe leachii* Reynolds
- *Cheilanthes leachii* Schelpe
- *Crassula leachii* R.Fern.
- *Dombeya leachii* Wild
- *Echidnopsis leachii* Lavranos
- *Eulophia leachii* Greatrex ex A.V.Hall
- *Huernia leachii* Lavranos

A few years ago the authors were privileged to “rediscover” many of Leach’s collections, records, photographs and notes at his last place of employment – the Herbarium at the University of the North (now University of Limpopo), situated on the outskirts of Polokwane (previously Pietersburg) in the Limpopo Province of South Africa. Here Larry spent his last days trying to resolve the immensely difficult *E. schinzii* complex, a challenge which, sadly, he never completed.

In this article we aim to summarize the extent and composition of the “Larry Leach



Fig. 1: Larry Leach on expedition in Angola, posing here with the rare *Aloe procera*
(Photo: University of Limpopo)



Fig. 2: The herbarium at the University of Limpopo, South Africa (Photos 2-6: Alma Moller)

collection” as it is preserved in the herbarium at the University of Limpopo. Because our main interest is in *Euphorbia* and the largest part of the collection is from this genus, we shall focus on the euphorbias only, but the reader should keep in mind that there is quite a bit of information about stapeliads and aloes as well, especially slides and photographs.

So what did Leach leave at the herbarium? The assortment of *Euphorbia* paraphernalia is impressive and diverse – there are 89 live plants still housed in the hothouse and 1,075 bottled and carefully labelled samples in the spirit collection. The extensive collection of audio visual items includes 4,765 black and white negatives and 1,594 colour slides, as well as a number of reels of 35 mm films. The negatives and slides have all been converted to digital format.

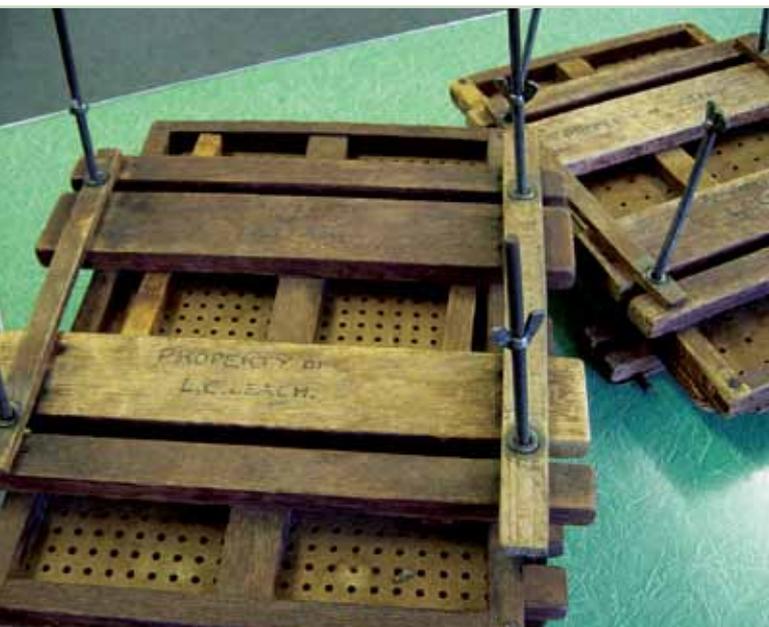


Fig. 4: Original plant presses used by Leach, specially designed and made for processing succulent material



Fig. 3: The spirit collection at the University of Limpopo contains over 1,000 samples of collected *Euphorbia* material

In addition there are 638 dried and pressed, but unlabelled samples. It is turning out to be quite a task to curate these so that they can become a permanent part of the herbarium material. The herbarium also has a substantial number of the booklets that Larry used to document his collection notes and observations. In total there are 18,025 identification numbers in his notes and we have found entries 9,276 to 18,025

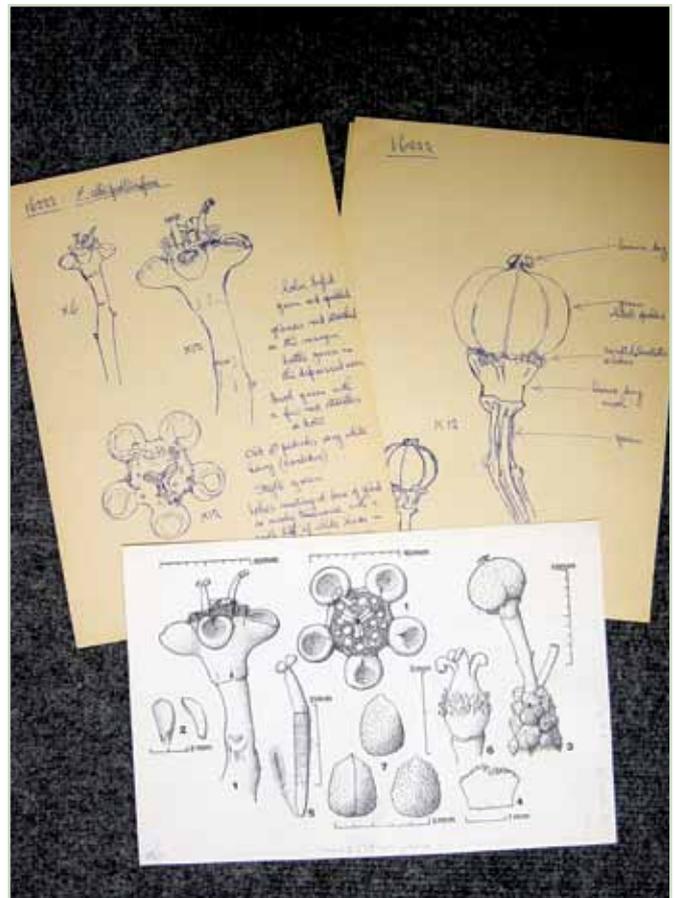


Fig. 5: Leach always made copious notes and drawings in preparation for the description of a new species, as for *E. albipollinifera* depicted here

amongst material stored here, i.e. 8,749 entries. These have also been converted to digital format and date from 7 August 1959 to 3 March 1996, a few months before his death. Larry Leach kept meticulous record of his material, observations and descriptions and the herbarium hosts many of the hand-written notes and drawings accompanying his substantial list of new descriptions.

But most importantly, through this legacy the late Larry Leach has not only preserved his valuable research material and some insight into his thought processes, but has left behind a collection from which future botanists can draw understanding and inspiration. Hopefully many of them will follow him into a life dedicated to the study of southern Africa's bountiful flora.

Finally, it gives the authors great pleasure to announce that the University of Limpopo has recently made a decision to name the herbarium at the University the "Larry Leach Herbarium" – a fitting tribute to his dedication and achievements!

Reference

KIMBERLEY, M.J. (1996): Leslie Charles Leach 1909-1996. *Plantarum succulentarum botanicus insignis*. *Excelsa* 17: 79-87



Fig. 6: Remnants of the live collection accumulated by Leach and still maintained in the herbarium

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