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Beat Ernst Leuenberger (1946–2010)

Beat Ernst Leuenberger passed away on 20 May 2010 after a long illness. He was a world authority on *Cactaceae* and curator at the Botanic Garden and Botanical Museum Berlin-Dahlem for more than thirty years, first in charge of a sector in the phanerogamic herbarium and later in charge of the living collections of tropical and subtropical origin. In the latter position, he was instrumental in developing a refined, internationally acclaimed documentation system for the vast collection of living plants kept in the Botanic Garden Berlin-Dahlem.

Born on 27 August 1946 in Burgdorf, Kanton Bern in Switzerland, Beat Leuenberger grew up in his place of birth and for good reason always maintained the intonation typical of this canton, thereby bringing a special touch of Swiss culture into the institution in which he was to spend most of his working life. His interest in *Cactaceae* had developed very early on, at the age of seven, when he helped in a nursery in Burgdorf and became fascinated with this plant family and, in addition, started reading travel books on Mexico. In a sense, this specific combination – living plants and scientific literature – remained the leitmotiv for his entire life. At the age of sixteen, he took part in a student exchange programme, which brought him to the US for a year. Rather unsurprisingly, he had chosen Portales in the state of New Mexico, where he was able to study *Cactaceae* in the wild for the first time and also learn English and Spanish, languages in which he quickly became fluent.

Beat Leuenberger studied biology at the University of Berne and received his diploma (Lic. phil. nat.) in 1972. Later he moved to Germany in order to continue his studies at the University of Heidelberg, where he was strongly influenced by the well-known specialist for succulents Professor Werner Rauh. Determined to study his favourite family, he wrote his doctoral thesis supervised by Rauh on the diversity of pollen in *Cactaceae* and in 1975 received his Ph.D. from the University of Heidelberg.

In 1976 Beat Leuenberger, aged 30, joined the scientific staff of the Botanic Garden and Botanical Museum Berlin-Dahlem (then headed ad interim by Professor Johannes Gerloff), where he remained for the rest of his life. The first author will never forget what happened when Beat was working with the institute's scanning electron microscope for the first time: he calibrated the instrument and found a deviation of more than 10 %, meaning that many measurements taken before, several published, had

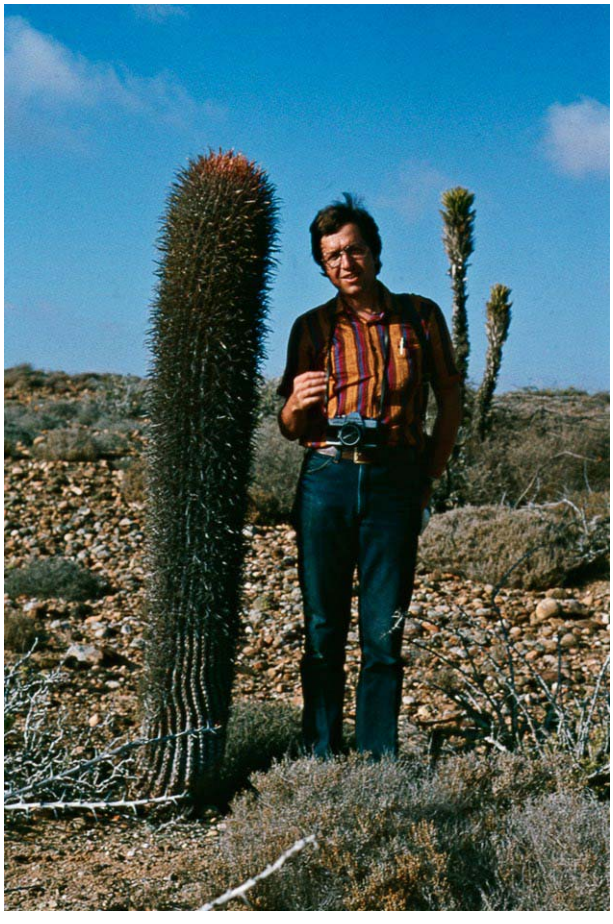


Fig. 1. Plant hunter and a good bag – Beat Ernst Leuenberger, aged 35, competing in size with *Leuenberger, Raus & Schiers 3010* (B, MEXU; *Ferocactus gracilis* var. *coloratus* (Gaters) G. Lindsay) 54 km N of Parallelo 28, 3 km W of ruta 1, Estado de Baja California Norte, Mexico, on 25.10.1981. – Photo Th. Raus.

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been inaccurate. This was one of his dominant character traits – accuracy, not only in measurements but also in arguments put forward and opinions expressed. After three years of work in the phanerogamic herbarium and the retirement of Dr. Edith Raadts (1914–2004), Beat became curator of the living collections of tropical and subtropical origin. Verifying the identity of plants cultivated in the Botanic Garden, documenting them in the form of herbarium specimens and photographs, shaping the profile of the living collection were part of his daily duties, as was giving guidance and advice to the gardeners on the various cultivation requirements.

Beat was permanently on the move – and was equally often to be found in the conservatories, the herbarium, the library and his office. In doing so he quickly acquired a broad knowledge of the institution's extensive facilities and deep insights into the diversity of vascular plants on a global scale.

Beat Leuenberger was always well aware of the fact that the study of plant diversity in the wild is a necessary complement to the work in the herbarium and the living collection. This is the reason why he travelled often and widely. His first major expedition was to Togo, very many followed, mostly to regions of the world rich in succulents such as Mexico and Namibia, where the second author enjoyed his companionship, being impressed ever since by Beat's excellent techniques in collecting plants unfriendly to a conventional plant press. From Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile and the Guianas he brought back a rich harvest of perfectly documented specimens very often accompanied by photographs and subsequently labelled and determined by him in a meticulous way. However, he was equally aware of the necessity to study plant material which had been deposited or was cultivated in other institutions, a quite different reason to travel to other countries. The Royal Botanic Gardens Kew with their extensive facilities were his destination time and again, and it was there that Beat Leuenberger met Silvia Arroyo from Buenos Aires, who soon became his wife, companion in his work and travels as well as co-author of several of his late publications.

There was a steady flow of publications from Beat's pen, almost all published in well-known journals, starting with a paper co-authored by R. Schill on pollen morphology and cytotaxonomy of the genus *Pachypodium (Apocynaceae)* and ending thirty-eight years later with a paper on the genus *Hieroymiella (Amaryllidaceae)* co-authored by his wife. There was a clear focus on succulents, in particular *Cactaceae,* but in line with his commitment to the living collection of tropical and subtropical origin there were also papers dealing with the taxonomy of other families, among them *Aizoaceae, Amaryllidaceae, Melastomataceae, Misodendraceae, Philesiaceae, Welwitschiaceae.* Together with other members of staff, Beat wrote the account of twenty families for the Flore analytique du Togo, among them *Asclepiadaceae, Combretaceae, Convolvulaceae, Malvaceae* and *Tiliaceae,* which was published in 1985. Beat monographed two genera of *Cactaceae* – *Pereskia* and *Maihunenia,* and he did so in the most accurate way one can imagine, correspondingly being awarded the Fellowship of the New York Botanical Garden. One might have had hoped for more, but Beat was not the person for the "quick and dirty" approach in science. In particular, he was always fully aware of the complexities of plant taxonomy, including the obligation to consistently and persistently go back to protologues, type specimens and illustrations, which made him a connoisseur of the history of plant taxonomy, equal to very few. His paper on Humboldt and Bonpland's *Cactaceae* in the herbaria at Paris and Berlin-Dahlem, the *Cactaceae* of the Willdenow herbarium, of Willdenow (1813) and type specimens of *Cactaceae* names in the Berlin herbarium may stand as examples. Together with U. Eggli and M. Muñoz Schick, Beat Leuenberger resolved the enigmas of the well-known, but chaotic Ritter collections, work for which he spent several months in Santiago de Chile. One of Beat's masterpieces was his study of male cone characters in *Welwitschia mirabilis,* which led to the recognition of a new subspecies in this most unconventional succulent gymnosperm. It combines accurate observations on specimens in cultivation and in the herbarium, precise measurements, carefully worded descriptions and excellent photographs.

He was always well aware of the legacy of the past and its relevance for modern taxonomy, as evidenced by his biographical notes on Franz Buxbaum, Hans Krainz and Friedrich Ritter. In a sense, Beat Leuenberger was the best choice possible for the position of a curator because he found and maintained the appropriate balance between research and care for botanical collections which has become so rare in these days of the "big ego". As for his superior curation of the Berlin-Dahlem living collections, he started immediately after 1976 to revive and push forward earlier local, alas abandoned, practices of documenting cultivated accessions with the help of specimens in the "Garden herbarium", meanwhile totalling c. 48 000, thus catapulting the Berlin living collection among the world's best in terms of scientific documentation. Several hundreds to more than one thousand determinations were his own annual share in these efforts, making this part of the Berlin-Dahlem herbarium collections his personal hall of fame. His most recent and historical input to the Berlin-Dahlem living collection was planning and supervising the evacuation and replanting of the c. 1300 vascular plant taxa on display in the Great Tropical House which had been closed and completely evacuated in June 2006 for refurbishment and reopened three years later on 17 September 2009, eight months prior to his passing. Gardeners gratefully enjoyed his professional advice and authority and always felt encouraged and confident under his special guidance.

At committee meetings he always spoke only about topics on which he was an expert, and very much to

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the point. Beat strongly disliked contacts with the press people, but in his quiet way was prepared to share his broad knowledge to the initiated. Photography, very often of plants, notably succulents, was his great hobby. He was well read, thoroughly enjoyed music and possessed a deep, long-term interest and expertise in foreign languages and cultures.

In autumn 2009, the diagnosis pancreatic cancer came as a shock to Beat, Silvia and all members of staff at the Botanic Garden and Botanical Museum Berlin-Dahlem; right from the beginning there was limited hope for recovery. Chemotherapy delayed the progress of the disease but resulted in fatigue and the impossibility to continue scientific work. During his last weeks, Beat was in an institution for palliative care in Berlin. Towards his end, there was the quiet and melodious music of Franz Schubert only which gave him consolation and peace.

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