Sansevieria Online
Online Journal
ISSN 2197-7895
Article 4
Vol. 14 (2)
10. October 2026

Last (?) notes on the history of *Sansevieria alwitrii*

WILBERT HETTERSCHEID
Heidelaan 9, 6721 CK Bennekom, Netherlands. - e-mail: hetter@xs4all.nl
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7839-4201

Abstract
Further information on the history of the introduction of *Sansevieria alwitrii* is provided, including the original herbarium material associated with its discovery. Some questions remain on the identity and origin of the holotype in the herbarium of Dar es Salaam (Tanzania).

Butler (2012: 25) shortly described a plant tagged "*Sansevieria sp.* Leiden 78-293" and presented two pictures (Butler, 2012, figs 16 & 17) showing a plant in leaf and one in flower (one reproduced here as **fig. 1**). Cloned plants with this tag indicating a Leiden origin, had been going around for quite a while (see **fig. 2** for an example plant in leaf). The species was finally recognised in 2023 as undescribed and named *Sansevieria alwitrii* R.H.Webb, L.E.Newton & A.Butler (Webb et. al,

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2023: 23) and shortly thereafter also given its name as a member of the genus *Dracaena* by Peter A. Mansfeld, *Dracaena alwitrii* (R.H.Webb, L.E.Newton & A.Butler) P.A.Mansf. (Mansfeld, 2024: 1). I continue using the name in *Sansevieria* in this note. Webb et al. presented a comprehensive summary of the history of its tags, concluding that the plant did not originate from the Leiden Botanical Garden but from the Wageningen Botanical Gardens and they proposed to change the tag to BG 98-293. The rationale being that no ambiguity would arise as to the specific botanical garden it came from, reducing the acronym to just the BG for Botanical Garden. But the change from Butler's label citation 78-293 to Webb et al.'s 98-293 remains unexplained.

I was director of the Wageningen Botanical Gardens from 2003 to 2009 and after recently catching the "*Sansevieria*-virus", I decided to check the old Wageningen botanical garden database (the botanical gardens were disowned by the university in 2009) with the help of Theo Damen from Wageningen, who still has access to a copy of that database. I also searched the digitized herbarium specimen collection of the former Wageningen University Herbarium (WAG), now integrated in the Naturalis Biodiversity Center, in Leiden. I used the collector's information, cited by Webb et al. (op. cit) for the holotype (Plaizier & Breteler s.n.)

Searching on "Plaizier & Breteler" yielded a digitized herbarium sheet in the WAG collection (WAG1157843) with an unidentified *Sansevieria* species labelled "Plaizier & Breteler 1132, Kenya, S. Nyanza, Kisii district (K5), Alt: 1310 m.; 0, 23S 34, 32E. 2 km before Ligasa school, beside the road". The specimen (here reproduced as **fig. 3**) holds two leaf fragments and is as such not informative as to species identity. But the next search, using the collectors' names incl. the collecting number as on the found sheet, yielded two herbarium sheets with the botanical garden accession number 1978PTKE293 (foreshadowing the number 78-293, mentioned by Butler, 2012). The scans (WAG0350473 & WAG0350474, reproduced here as **figs 4 & 5**) illustrate that Plaizier and Breteler brought living material of their above mentioned collected *Sansevieria* to Wageningen, where it was cultivated. The acronymic part "PTKE" in the accession number of the Wageningen BG stands for "Plant Taxonomy KEnya", being the name of the former Wageningen Plant Taxonomy Institute (housing the herbarium, incl. specimens made from plants in the botanical garden) and the country of origin of the specimen. That was the usual accession coding routine in the botanical gardens at the time. The living plant flowered on 26 January 1984 in the greenhouse there. Of the two sheets prepared from it, one has leaves only (**fig. 5**) and one has the entire inflorescence plus plant base and rhizome part (**fig. 4**). The parts were collected by herbarium staff member J. van Veldhuizen and he used his number 980 for the sheets. The labels of the two sheets also contain descriptions of the plant and its flowers.

I think it is obvious that the number of the living plant used by Butler (78-293) is reduced from the former accession number of the Wageningen botanical garden (1978PTKE293). The change of 78 to 98 in Webb et al. (op. cit.) may well be a reading mistake made by somebody of the 7 to a 9. The plant in Wageningen was given to the late Henny de Waal by my predecessor at the garden, Jan Just Bos, and Alan Butler acquired his plant from her, with the abbreviated number (pers. comm. Butler to the author). How the Leiden-indication became associated with this plant remains a mystery but looks like a mistake made by Henny de Waal, because it could never have left the Wageningen botanical gardens carrying the name Leiden.

I have not been able to trace a scan of the holotype of *Sansevieria alwitrii*, cited to be conserved in the herbarium of Dar es Salaam by Webb et al.

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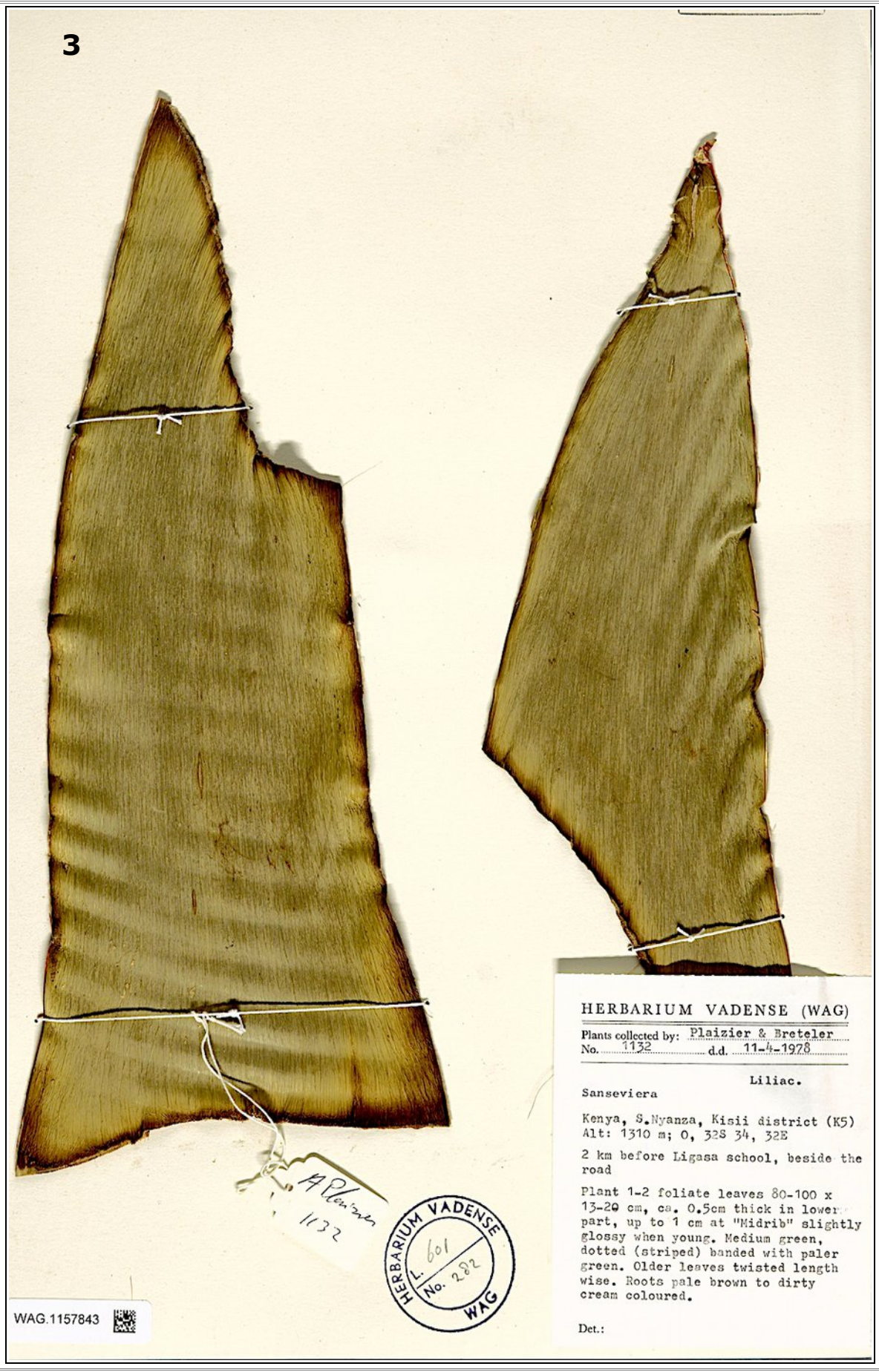

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In order to learn more about the cited holotype, I recently spoke with Frans Breteler (now in his 90s), one of the collectors of the original plant, and apparently producer of the cited holotype in Dar es Salaam. He told me however that they (Plaizier and himself) never deposited material of the plant anywhere but in Wageningen. They brought the plant alive to Wageningen, then cut off a few leaf fragments for a reference specimen (WAG1157843, **fig. 3** in this paper) with all the correct information and their collecting number (1132) and gave the living plant to the Wageningen Botanical Gardens to cultivate it until it would flower. When this happened, two herbarium specimens were made of it (WAG0350473 & WAG0350474, resp. **figs 4 & 5** in this publication), repeating the correct collecting number (1132) and providing a description of the flowering details. Breteler said to me that all herbarium material ever made by him from collections made in Kenya, are in Nairobi and he never deposited anything in Dar es Salaam and also he never deposited material anywhere without a collecting number. This begs the question why the label text on the Dar es Salaam holotype, cited by Webb et al., is so different from Breteler's story and questions if the Dar es Salaam specimen has been collected by Plaizier and Breteler at all. If that is not the case, the holotype citation is in error because it was not collected by Plaizier & Breteler but by somebody else (who may also have deposited in Dar es Salaam). A holotype specimen must always be attributed to the person

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who actually collected the plant (parts) on a holotype collection and this must be cited on the label and used/repeated exactly in all communication about a holotype. Another issue with the holotype concerns the mismatch of locality information on it (as quoted by Webb et al.) with the information on the sheet WAG1157843 (Plaizier & Breteler 1132), which is clearly the only sheet of the Wageningen plant proven to have been made by the collectors themselves. Apparently Webb et al. got information of the label of this sheet and concluded that there is an anomaly between the written GPS locality (near Ligasa school in Homa Bay) and the actual GPS coordinates of that school. That may well be a good correction but in the citation of a holotype, all the information of the label must be cited and not a part left out and supplanted by corrected information by a third party. The correction should be cited with the holotype data, alongside the original data.

All in all, the information I gathered so far sheds doubt about the correctness of the procedures for preparing and depositing the holotype specimen.

Conclusion

The association of the name *Sansevieria alwitrii* with the original living Wageningen plant, once coded "Leiden 79-293", is clear from the main text of Webb et all. (2024). The long standing confusing coding of the clonal plants derived from this plant is cleared up further in this article and this code should read 1978PTKE293 and has no connection to Leiden. As to the holotype citation of *S. alwitrii* in Webb et al., it has become clear that the citation of its collectors is wrong. The holotype cannot have been collected by Plaizier & Breteler (see above). This means that it is unknown if this specimen, now in Dar es Salaam but not deposited there by Plaizier & Breteler and carrying confusing information (lack of number and questionable locus typicus information), can actually be the correct type for the name *S. alwitrii* as meant in the protologue (Webb et all., 2024).

As the deadline for this paper forced me to break off my further investigation into this matter, I will write an additional note on this later.

Acknowledgements

I thank Theo Damen of Wageningen (taxonomist for the genus *Dracaena*) for his aid in searching a copy of the defunct database of the former Wageningen Botanical Gardens. I also thank Alan Butler for several messages helping me to get a few details straight and for his picture of a flowering plant of *S. alwitrii* (fig. 1). I thank Urszula Strojna-Bronikowska for providing a picture of a plant in leaf (fig. 2). And I thank Robert Webb for a short conversation on the Dar es Salaam citation, although this conversation did not immediately cleared up every question I have. Hopefully a next time.

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