

## OBITUARY

JOHANNES JACOBUS ADRIAAN VAN DER WALT (1938–2003)

Johannes Jacobus Adriaan (Adri) van der Walt (Figure 1), renowned for his research and books on *Pelargonium*, died on 28 November 2003 in Kleinmond, Western Cape.

He was born on 16 October 1938 in Krugersdorp, where he grew up and attended school. Though he never spoke of those days, I presume that his parental home was not too distant from open veld and that the young Adri roamed the fields and ridges in his free time, acquiring his love for plants which served him so well in later years. In 1956 he enrolled at the University of Pretoria, attaining a B.Sc. with Botany and Zoology in 1958. Having a didactic leaning, he enrolled for a Higher Education Diploma which he attained in 1961 and a B.Ed. attained in 1966, and from 1961 to 1967 taught biology for the Transvaal Education Department. Meanwhile he enrolled for a M.Sc. at the University of Pretoria, studying the secondary growth of certain lianes under the tutelage of Professors H.G. Schweickerdt (Van der Schijff 1977) and H.P. van der Schijff (Theron 1998), and graduating in 1963. In 1968 he was appointed lecturer of Botany at the University of Zululand near Empangeni. In 1969 he joined

the Botany Department of the University of Stellenbosch as lecturer and succeeded P.G. Jordaan as Professor in 1979 (Van der Walt 1987).

He also enrolled at Pretoria University for further studies on his research project, the taxonomy of *Commiphora* (Burseraceae) in South Africa and Namibia, for which he was awarded a doctorate in 1971.

At Stellenbosch University he consolidated his position and soon became known for his emphasis on teaching and research, aspects dear to the University. He started looking for a good long-term research project, and the catalyst was the meeting with botanical artist Ellaphie Ward-Hilhorst who had the ambition of making a water-colour painting of every *Pelargonium* species [see dedication to Ellaphie Ward-Hilhorst in *Flowering Plants of Africa* 54 (1995), and Rourke 1994]. This resulted in the first volume of *Pelargoniums of southern Africa* (Van der Walt 1977), the second and third volumes following after I had joined the team (Van der Walt & Vorster 1981, 1988). This work on *Pelargonium* became his main focus for the rest of his life. He was a great organizer, with a knack for persuading people to work for his goals, and at one time a considerable proportion of the department's staff was working for him. He recruited a number of local and international collaborators including Dr Mary Gibby at the Natural History Museum in London, Prof. Focke Albers of the University of Münster (both cytologists), and Dr Frédéric Demarne of CIRAD-IRAT Réunion (essential oils). His interest encompassed the whole of the Geraniaceae as having a bearing on *Pelargonium*, and his encouragement led to monographs of *Sarcocaulon* (Moffett 1979), *Monsonia* (Venter 1979), as well as an account of the South African *Erodium* species (Venter & Verhoeven 1990). In 1990 he organized an International Geraniaceae Symposium in Stellenbosch to which came the world's experts in this field (Vorster 1990).

Adri took research seriously. During the late 1970s and 1980s he travelled extensively throughout South Africa, collecting *Pelargonium* both as herbarium specimens and as living plants which were grown in his department's botanic garden. This living collection proved to be of great value, enabling several new species to be recognized, chromosome numbers to be determined, essential oil compositions to be established, anatomical studies to be executed, and illustrations to be prepared. Molecular research currently undertaken overseas is largely based on cuttings originating from this material. He preferred to refer to his chosen field as biosystematics rather than taxonomy, defining it as taxonomy beyond the alpha level.

He was a popular teacher on all levels. He had a way of attracting students and I well remember his engrossing lectures and happy field excursions when I first came to Stellenbosch. He had no difficulty in recruiting post-



FIGURE 1.—J.J.A. van der Walt (1938–2003).





FIGURE 2.—J.J.A. van der Walt admiring a *Commiphora* in Namibia, early 1980s.

graduate students. Many of his students eventually made headway in botany, including Jo Beyers, Matt Buys, Leanne Dreyer, Loretta Hugo, Gillian Maggs, Bettie Marais, Mike Müller, Koos Roux, Marianna Schonken, Mary Thompson, Ben-Erik van Wyk, and Alvaro Viljoen. He also had endless patience with amateur growers and interested members of the public, and this attribute, no less than his books and other publications, fostered a world-wide interest in the collection and cultivation of *Pelargonium* species as opposed to cultivars.

Honours and awards followed, including the Compton Prize for the best article in the *Journal of South African Botany* in 1988 and 1993, honorary membership of the International Geranium Society based in the USA in 1994, and the Havenga Prize for Biological Sciences awarded by the South African Academy for Science and the Arts in 2000. He served on the Board of the National Botanical Gardens from 1989 to 1992, and coined the name 'National Botanical Institute'.

Besides *Pelargonium*, his main interest lay in almost any team sport, as observer rather than participant, and invariably his day was started by reading the sport pages

of *Die Burger*. In his younger days he was fond of freshwater angling, sometimes with his pupils. He was also very fond of the veld and always hugely enjoyed the field trips and hunting down elusive species. He often spoke of his wonderful field trips with W. Giess (Kolberg 2001) in Namibia (Figure 2). He enjoyed telling about the outrageous escapades of his fellow students while at university, but it appears as if he himself never took part in these exercises. He was a devoted member of his church, the *Gereformeerde Kerk*, as well as a member of the *Broederbond*.

Prior to the commencement of his work on *Pelargonium*, he collected at least 306 numbers of herbarium specimens which are housed in PRE and PRU, and some in WIND. No collecting register of this period seems to be in existence. Subsequently his numbering system became somewhat confusing in that the material which he and his collaborators collected were assigned STEU numbers which were also applied to plants in the living collections, and starting at 400. Some of these specimens bear a Van der Walt collection number as well as an identical STEU number, whereas others have different Van der Walt and STEU numbers. It is recommended that these specimens be referred to as, for example, *Van der Walt 538 sub STEU483* or *Van der Walt s.n. sub STEU2786*. Again, no collecting register exists: the data were entered in little 164 × 87 mm landscape format pocketbooks, one accession to a page. There are 30 of these books containing 4 371 accessions collected by Van der Walt as well as his collaborators. At the time of writing, these books are still in the Botany Department, University of Stellenbosch. The main set of the *Pelargonium* herbarium collection is in PRE, with at least some duplicates in NBG, STEU, K, MO, and BM in order of abundance.

Surprisingly, he took early retirement in 1996 at the age of 58 and made what he called a clean break with botany. He settled at Kleinmond where he lived out his days. He also acquired a small farm in the Caledon District where he potted about, keeping bees, experimenting with growing indigenous plants, and battling with alien invaders, while delighting in the re-appearance of indigenous species after clearing the land.

Shortly before his retirement he was diagnosed with cancer. The treatment appeared to be successful, but after a few years the cancer flared up again and turned out to be terminal, mercifully rapidly so.

He is survived by his wife Isabel, and three of their four children. All three of these scions are involved with plants: Dawid as nurseryman, Riaan as conservation officer, and Gerda as farmer.

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