

**BAREND PETRUS BARKHUIZEN (1921–1995):  
AMATEUR BOTANIST, SUCCULENT PLANT SPECIALIST AND EDUCATOR**

Three years ago the South African botanical community lost one of its most active and knowledgeable amateur succulent plant specialists with the passing of Barend Petrus (Ben) Barkhuizen. Although he trained as a teacher, from an early age he was interested in nature, in particular the wonderfully diverse succulent plant flora of the subcontinent. He was in many ways a pioneer and produced a book (Barkhuizen 1978) on the succulents of the subcontinent at a time when there was precious little literature available on this component of our

flora (Van der Schijff 1995). To this day this publication is the only book on the subject which originally appeared in Afrikaans.

Ben Barkhuizen was born on 6 August 1921 in the North-West Province of South Africa, an area then generally known as the western Transvaal. With two brothers and two sisters, Ben grew up on his father's cattle farm, Schietkraal, near Amalia in the district of Schweizer Reneke. In this arid and often drought-stricken bushveld



FIGURE 4.—Prof. Ben Barkhuizen where he was happiest—surrounded by part of his beloved potted succulent plant collection. Undated photograph taken at Kameeldrift, north of Pretoria.

region, Ben became interested in succulents at the age of 15 and maintained a fascination with these plants for the rest of his life. The ability of succulents to survive long periods of drought and still more or less regularly produce striking flowers particularly fascinated Ben. He completed the first eight years of his education at the farm school Uitvalskop and thereafter attended the secondary school at Schweizer Reneke for three years before transferring to the Helpmekaar Hoërskool in Johannesburg where he matriculated in 1939. It must have been a rather testing move for the young Ben who had up to that time been accustomed to the dry flatlands of a thinly populated rural area. After matriculating in Johannesburg, he returned to the western Transvaal and enrolled at the Potchefstroom University College for a diploma in education. At the end of 1942 he received the Transvaal Teachers Diploma and immediately joined the ranks of the primary school teaching community in which he remained for the next 26 years, until 1967. During this time Ben successively held positions at the following schools: as a teacher at the Werda Primary School in Springs (1943–1955), as vice-principal at the same school (1955–1959), as deputy principal at the Pierneef Primary School in Pretoria (1960–1962), and finally as principal at Die Poort Primary School, also in Pretoria, from 1963–1967. Virtually throughout this period of teaching Ben remained academically active and obtained all his degrees by correspondence from the University of South Africa (UNISA). As anyone who has ever done academic studies part time or by correspondence will testify, a special dedication is required to achieve success. Ben displayed this dedication and commitment and graduated with a B.A. degree soon after he started his teaching career, a B.Ed. in 1960, M.Ed. (*cum laude*) in 1962 and D.Ed. in 1968. Just before completing his doctorate, he accepted a position as senior lecturer (1968–1972) at his alma mater, UNISA, where he later became professor and head of the Department of Empirical Education (1973–1979).

Ben, a large, burly man of over two metres tall, was also a good sportsman and excelled at rugby, in which he

was awarded provincial colours for Eastern Transvaal. He firmly believed that a healthy mind resides in a healthy body. In later years this belief, coupled with his lifelong interest in the education of the youth of our country, possibly prompted his accepting positions such as Chairman of the Board that administered the funds of the Transvaal Youth Trust (Barkhuizen 1995). The primary objective of this organisation is to provide financial assistance to underprivileged scholars for participation in activities at school and on regional, national and international levels.

During his early years as a teacher in Springs he met a petite girl, Rita de Jager, who became his lifelong companion on 5 April 1946. She shared his love for succulents and, with their two sons, Johan and Lex, accompanied him on numerous excursions through the arid landscapes of Namibia, the Karoo, the Northern Cape and the western parts of the Free State in search of prized specimens for his collection. Eventually, in 1959, when the family moved from Strubenvale on the East Rand to a smallholding, virtually on the banks of the Roodeplaat Dam near Pretoria, his beloved succulents finally found a home in the spacious back yard of the property (Figure 4). Here the collection was augmented, cared for, propagated sexually and vegetatively, and studied. Observations made in this nursery formed the basis of many of Ben's talks to the local community and articles in popular family magazines on the care and cultivation of these fascinating drought-surviving plants (Van der Schijff 1978). Numerous, illustrated articles on South African succulents also appeared during the years 1964–1967 in the modest, early editions of *Aloe*, the journal of the South African Aloe and Succulent Society.

Prof. Barkhuizen was also an accomplished linguist. He, amongst others, translated the *Aloe* book published by Jeppe (1969) into Afrikaans. This necessitated the creation of a number of novel Afrikaans words, e.g. the use of the words 'gedronge stamme' for the shortish stems produced by the maculate aloes, such as *A. mudenensis*.

After his retirement Ben continued his research in the botanical field. By 1984 he was working on a book on the succulents of the old Transvaal province of South Africa (Coetzee 1984). However, Dave Hardy, horticulturist at the former Botanical Research Institute, had embarked on a similar project (Hardy & Fabian 1992). Ben eventually abandoned this idea and then concentrated his efforts on a book on the succulents of the Little Karoo. It is not known what happened to what must have been a partially completed manuscript.

His love of nature was not limited to succulents, although these plants remained his first love throughout his life. His general interest in nature and the indigenous flora of southern Africa also found expression in garden landscaping. He played a significant role in the development of the gardens of UNISA and the gardens of the Medical University of South Africa, both in Pretoria. His involvement in the former resulted in the publication of two books (Barkhuizen 1975, 1984). In both these works his multidisciplinary and holistic approach to landscaping is quite evident.

Ben Barkhuizen died unexpectedly of a heart attack on 23 September 1995. He is survived by his wife, Rita, younger son Lex, and six grandchildren. His collection which had amassed to an alleged number of 20 000 plants, was purchased by succulent enthusiasts.

## REFERENCES

- BARKHUIZEN, B.P. 1975. *Die broodboomtuin van Unisa / The cycad garden of Unisa*. University of South Africa, Pretoria.
- BARKHUIZEN, B.P. 1978. *Vetplante van suidelike Afrika met spesifieke verwysing na die vetplantfamilies van die Republiek van Suid-Afrika en Suidwes-Afrika*. Perskor, Johannesburg. (Also translated into English by Dr E. M. van Aardweg: *Succulents of southern Africa with special reference to the succulent families of the Republic of South Africa and South West Africa*. Purnell, Cape Town).
- BARKHUIZEN, B.P. 1984. *Bome, struik en voëls van Unisarand / trees, shrubs and birds of Unisarand*. University of South Africa, Pretoria. (For reviews see *Unisa News-Nuus* 11,4 and 11,7. The 16 full-colour illustrations of birds by Ingrid Bredell were also sold as separate sets).
- BARKHUIZEN, B.P. 1995. Die voorsitter van die Transvaalse Jeugtrust sê dankie / The chairman of the Transvaal Jouth Trust says thank you). Northvaal Golf Tournament, Monument Golf Club, 2 & 3 October 1995.
- COETZEE, A. 1984. A deep-rooted love of trees. *Pretoria News*, Thursday, 14 June 1984.
- HARDY, D. & FABIAN, A. 1992. *Succulents of the Transvaal*. Southern Book Publishers, Halfway House.
- JEPPE, B. 1969. *South African aloes*. Purnell, Cape Town.
- VAN DER SCHIJFF, H.P. 1978. Foreword. In B. P. Barkhuizen, *Succulents of southern Africa with special reference to the succulent families of the Republic of South Africa and South West Africa*. Purnell, Cape Town.
- VAN DER SCHIJFF, H.P. 1995. Ben Barkhuizen, die stille plantkundige. *Beeld*, Friday, 1 December 1995: 6.

G.F. SMITH\* and E.M.A. STEYN\*

\* National Botanical Institute, Private Bag X101, 0001 Pretoria.