

Wild plants and their habitats

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This opening issue of volume 150 of our journal does not mark its 150th anniversary. The first volume was published in 1862. The yearly publication of a volume passed through some interruptions, especially during the First World War, so our journal is now in fact in its 156th year.

Although volume 150 is not a true jubilee volume, we would like to use the occasion for some reflections. The first issue of the “Bulletins de la Société royale de Botanique de Belgique” appeared in 1862, the year of the foundation of the “Société.” It opened with the publication of a lecture held at the founding session (Dumortier 1862). It is a survey of the history of botany in Belgium, starting from the days of the “great four” Fuchs, Dodoens, de l’Obel and de l’Ecluse. The other content of volume 1 is mainly of local floristic nature. This reflects the objective of the Société at the time, to attract professional as well as amateur botanists.

The subsequent evolution of the journal shows many trends such as professionalisation (see Diagre-Vanderpeelen 2014) and internationalisation – a paper in a forthcoming issue will present more detailed considerations on the history of the journal. The scope shifted from local floristics to even – until 2010 – general botany. In that year the scope was narrowed again to systematics and ecology, a change reflected in the new title “Plant Ecology and Evolution.” Field observation and knowledge is now central in our scope, with emphasis on wild plants and their habitats. That focus, although initially much more local, has thus persisted for more than 150 years.

Belgium was a young nation when our journal started, and its proudness (or pretention?) is seemingly even reflected in the title of Dumortier’s above-mentioned lecture: “sur les services rendus par les belges à la botanique”. The flora of our very little country is not truly speciose, and endemics hardly exist. Still, the local botanists declared some taxa to be endemic, hence emblematic. Most of these now disappeared into synonymy, but notably the Aywaille Houseleek (*Sempervivum funckii* F.Braun ex Koch var. *aqualiense* E.Morren) and the Brome of the Ardennes (*Bromus bromoides* (Lej.) Crép. or *Bromus arduennensis*) withstood history and remained long recognised.

The Brome was even used to honour a Belgian botanist with a name at the generic level (*Libertia arduennensis*).

This was a severe exaggeration. We now know that section *Bromus*, comprising annual species, is a taxonomically difficult group comprising several species complexes. The Brome of the Ardennes is probably only a variant of *Bromus secalinus* L. (Ainouche & Bayer 1997).

Sempervivum funckii var. *aqualiense* (Crassulaceae) is currently the only endemic vascular plant taxon of Belgium still existing in the wild. *Sempervivum funckii* is considered a hybrid of horticultural origin, and the taxonomical status of var. *aqualiense* remains obscure (see Van Rossum et al. in this issue, pages 4–12). Yet, the taxon is emblematic and has a patrimonial value for conservation and botany in Belgium; it was chosen as the base for the logo of the Royal Botanical Society of Belgium.

Field knowledge of (changing) floras and vegetation is nowadays an essential supporting tool for many disciplines, even archaeology, as shown in the second paper of this issue (see pages 13–34). It reports on the vegetation at the Klasies River cultural landscape, on the Tsitsikamma coast, south-eastern Cape, South Africa, featuring prominently in research into the origins of modern humans. The paper is an essential step in providing context for the identification of past vegetation and its usage by Stone Age populations. One reviewer remarked how thought-provoking it is that most of the ruderal species observed occur frequently at archaeological sites throughout the southern Cape and are all widely used today.

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