

# Orchids

SOUTH AFRICA

2018



*Brachycorythis*  
*conica*  
subsp. *transvaalensis*

~Roodepoort, GP  
2014

Dalene Roodt

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## The naming of the Albertina Sisulu Orchid – a double centenary celebration!

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*Brachycorythis conica* subsp. *transvaalensis* – a tongue twister of note and not an easy name to remember either.

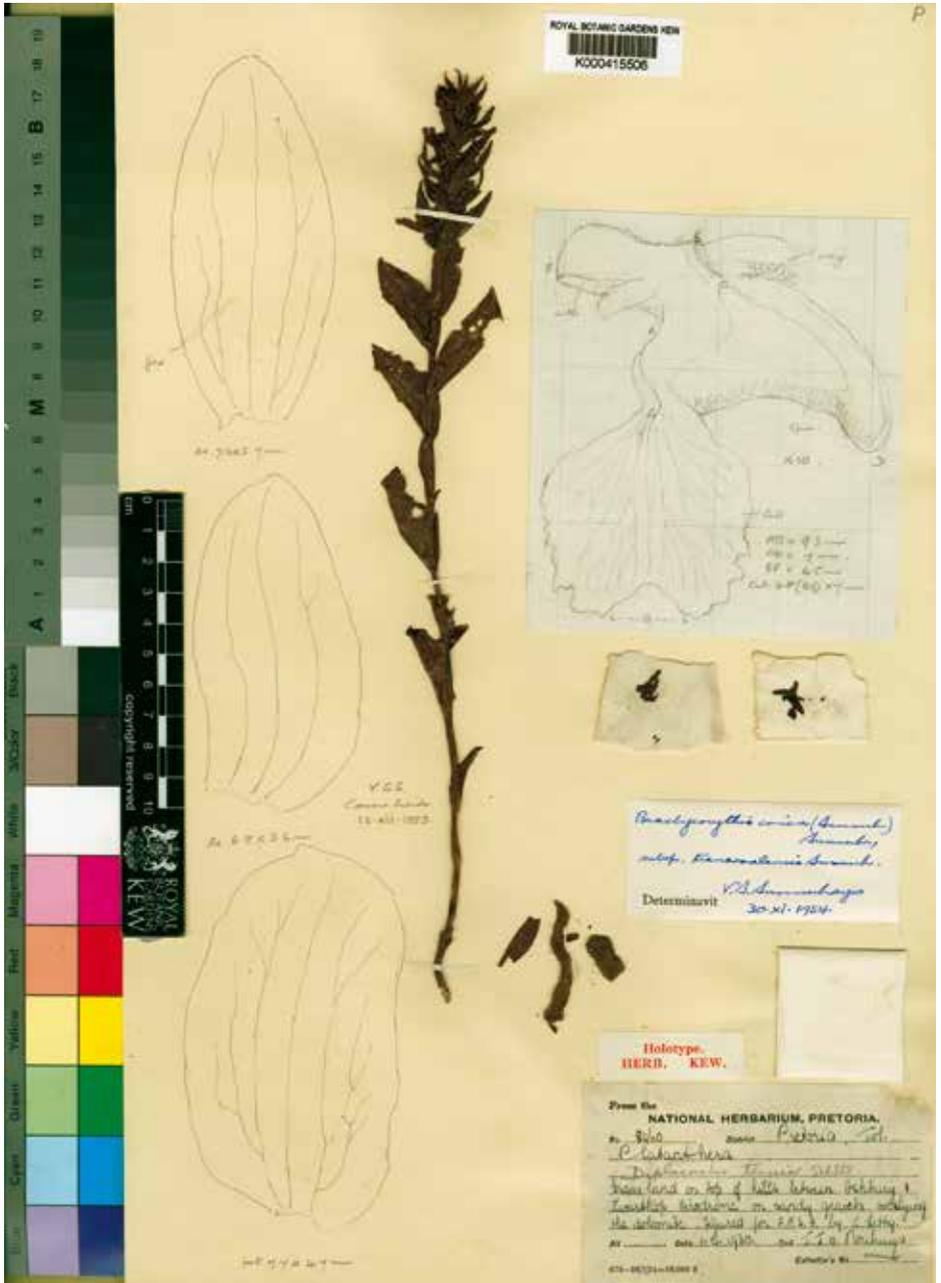
This was exactly what Kay Montgomery put on the table as chairlady of one of the workshops at the First WOSA Conference in 2016. “Find a common name that everyone can relate to” was the brief. “One that allows the public to relate to the orchid, remember its name and makes it much easier to popularise a plant.”

After much deliberation it was decided that it should be named after an icon that enjoyed plants, a name that everyone has heard and that everyone can relate to. During a subsequent informal meeting the name “*Albertina Sisulu Orchid*” was proposed in commemoration of the wife of the apartheid stalwart, Walter Sisulu (1912-2003), since the last known viable colony of plants is situated a mere 2.5km away from the Walter Sisulu National

Botanical Gardens. On request for permission to use the name, the Sisulu family was overjoyed that such a rare, delicate and beautiful flower should have been selected to bear the name of such a truly special, caring and gentle mother of the nation and immediately gave their blessing. The new name found immediate traction due to the obvious linkage to Ma’ Sisulu’s husband and apartheid struggle icon whose name was bestowed on the adjacent Walter Sisulu National Botanical Gardens in 2004, which protects part of the adjacent ridge system where the rare orchid finds its last refuge.

Further research into the life and history of apartheid activist Albertina Nontsikelelo Sisulu (aka Ma Sisulu, (1918–2011), provided some very

LEFT: The official Albertina Sisulu Orchid Logo developed by Moira van Winkel is based on the illustration by renowned artist Daleen Roodt.



Holotype Specimen of *Brachycorythis conica* subsp. *transvaalensis* - Albertina Sisulu Orchid: Kew Herbarium.

interesting linkages. So much so that it seemed that the naming of the orchid after Ma' Sisulu was meant to be.

Albertina Sisulu was born in the town of Camama, 90km east of Queenstown in the then Transkei in 1918. That is the very same year that the *Brachycorythis conica* subsp. *transvaalensis* was first discovered in an area just west of Pretoria. It was initially allocated to the genus *Platanthera* and then later named *Diplacorchis tenuior* as can be seen in the Holotype voucher of a plant collected in April 1930. Originally deposited at the National Herbarium in Pretoria, the voucher now resides at the Herbarium at the Royal Botanical Gardens in Kew, England. The location of this specimen is noted as the hills between Ashbury and Zwartkops Aerodrome (now known as the Swartkop Air Force Base). This species was subsequently transferred to the genus *Brachycorythis*, although still as the species *B. tenuior*, a close relative, and was illustrated as such in *Flowering Plants of Africa* in 1933.

The orchid was finally recognised as a separate taxon in 1954 by Kew botanist and orchid scientist, Victor Samuel Summerhayes (1897–1974) where he published it as part of a Revision of the Genus *Brachycorythis* in the *Kew Bulletin* in 1955. This happened in the same year that Albertina Sisulu joined the ANC Women's League and took part in the launch of the Freedom Charter.

The orchid was last recorded in Gauteng one year later outside Krugersdorp in 1956 by Dr John Acocks (1911-1979). That was the same year that mama Albertina Sisulu joined Helen Joseph and Sophia Williams-De Bruyn, in a march to the Union Buildings in Pretoria with 20 000 other women protesting against the apartheid pass laws. It seems the orchid had also gone into exile as did many of the apartheid activists around that time.

The orchid was not recorded again in Gauteng in the national herbarium for 51 years until 2007 – just 4 years before the sad passing of Ma' Sisulu - when it was rediscovered unintentionally by Andrew Hankey at its current location just over the ridge behind the Walter Sisulu National Botanical Gardens. We believe that these dates are no



Photograph: Sisulu Family

Albertina Sisulu.

coincidence. The name was a match to be and in many ways the orchid is now fighting for its survival – just as Ma' Albertina Sisulu did with her children, and many friends during the very dark days of apartheid while her husband was held in detention.

The Albertina Sisulu Orchid was once known from a number (16) of locations in Gauteng, Mpumalanga and Limpopo but urban development has wiped out all but one last viable colony of about 130 plants which remains bordering the Walter Sisulu National Botanical Gardens. That ridge area in which the orchids are found is also a hunting ground for the majestic Black Eagle that draws so many tourists to the renowned Botanical Garden.

Originally classified as vulnerable then endangered, the Albertina Sisulu Orchid Red List status was reclassified to critically endangered in 2015 based on surveys conducted between 2010 and 2015.

In 2014 renowned nature and botanical artist Daleen Roodt had prepared a



Photograph: SANBI

The formal unveiling of the bust of Walter Sisulu and the opening of the Sisulu Circle at the Walter Sisulu National Botanical Garden, Roodepoort on 10 July 2018.

beautiful painting of the special orchid. Daleen was approached as to whether the painting could be used as a basis for a logo depicting the Albertina Sisulu Orchid. She too was honoured and gave her blessing. This saw the birth of the Albertina Sisulu Orchid logo designed by Moira Van Winkel, that is now synonymous with the conservation effort of the orchid.

The opportunity then arose to proceed with the official naming of the orchid during the launch of the Sisulu Circle at the Walter Sisulu National Botanical Gardens on 10 July 2018. A true double centenary celebration – the 100th birthday of Albertina Sisulu and the naming of the Albertina Sisulu Orchid, equally 100 years old! The construction of the spectacular Sisulu Circle was a South African National Biodiversity Institute initiative made possible by funding from the Department of Tourism for development of tourism infrastructure.

The prestigious event itself was attended by members of the Sisulu family including Max Sisulu and his wife Elinor,

the minister of Environmental Affairs, the late Dr Edna Molewa, the minister of Tourism, Mr. Derek Hanekom as well as the Mayor of Mogale City, Cllr Patrick Lipudi, members of the Department of Environmental Affairs, SANBI as well as members of the community. The unveiling of the bust of Walter Sisulu overseeing the Sisulu Circle was televised live on the local morning show Expresso.

After the unveiling, a number of keynote presentations were made to the distinguished guests. This included a short presentation by Karsten Wodrich Vice Chairman of Wild Orchids Southern Africa (WOSA) and also representing the Proteadale Conservation Association (PCA). His presentation included an impassioned plea to all, to conserve the stretch of land that currently contains the last viable colony of the orchid. At the same time Mr Wodrich presented a limited-edition framed print of the Albertina Sisulu Orchid painting by Daleen Roodt to the Sisulu family, who graciously showed their appreciation for the gesture by WOSA and the PCA.



Photograph: SANBI

The official handover of the print of the Sisulu Orchid to representatives of the Sisulu family by Karsten Wodrich.



Photograph: K. Wodrich

Children enjoying the fountain in the new Sisulu Circle that is situated at the entrance of the Botanical Garden.

With reference to the painting the presentation Mr Wodrich concluded with the following:

*“When any member of the Sisulu family sees this painting of the orchid on their mantelpiece at home and asks: Where can we see the Albertina Sisulu Orchid? I, nor any of us gathered here today, want to have to say: It no longer exists.*

*Ladies and gentlemen that is unfortunately the harsh reality. If the development*

*goes ahead you and I will most likely be witnesses to the extinction of the species in our lifetime. That is why we say: Let us do the right thing!*

*Let us not waste more tax payers’ money and let us not waste more private money in lengthy legal proceedings. Let us today make a decision to conserve this rare stretch of land.*

*A piece of land with its unique fauna and flora - to be enjoyed and cherished*



Photographer: A. Hamkey

*Brachycorythis conica* subsp. *transvaalensis*  
*in situ*.

by generations to come and in memory of two very special people - the late Albertina Nontsikelelo Sisulu and her husband Walter Max Ulyate Sisulu."

The legal challenge referred to is the current court case against the Record of Decision by the Member of the Executive Council of the Gauteng Department of Agriculture and Rural Development to proceed with the development of housing infrastructure in the area that the orchid is currently found in.

Mogale City, the current owner of the land, had originally recognised the environmental sensitivity (2005) of the area and had proposed to incorporate the ridge which is listed as a Critically Endangered Ecosystem into an Urban Biodiversity Reserve. Unfortunately, Mogale City subsequently abandoned those plans in favour of the proposed 150ha urban development. As a result, these development plans currently form the basis of a review application in the High Court by the Proteadale Conservation Association.

The plea, however, seemed to have struck a chord with the dignitaries present at the launch with most speakers including the minister of Environmental Affairs the late Dr Edna Molewa, as well as the Major of Mogale City, Councillor Patrick Lipudi commenting that all present should work towards conservation of the special orchid. Cllr Lipudi went further, to provide an undertaking that he would personally facilitate an out of court settlement of the pending legal action.

We believe that those intentions voiced were sincere and that the resolution to resolve the legal action will be followed through with expedience, so that the Albertina Sisulu Orchid, the black eagles and other wildlife on the endangered ridge system can have their own protected space to exist under the African sun. In this way, the community can have something unique that it can be proud of and show their children for generations to come.

**Acknowledgements:**

Daleen Roodt is thanked for the use of the illustration.



Photographer: A. Hankey

*Brachycorythis conica* subsp. *transvaalensis*.



Photographer: K. Wodrich

One of the many colour forms of *Brachycorythis conica* subsp. *transvaalensis* flowering in February 2015.



Photographer: A. Hankey

*Brachycorythis conica* subsp. *transvaalensis*.

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**ABOUT THE AUTHORS**



**Karsten Wodrich** has been growing indigenous orchids for over 32 years. His main interest is in the terrestrials which present their own issues in cultivation and propagation from seed. As a mechanical

engineer he is always interested in finding out what makes things tick. And what better challenge than to find out and document what the terrestrials do below soil level. At the same time he is actively propagating species and hybrids from seed again and looking at new methods and more cost effective and efficient ways to do so. Karsten is currently the Vice Chairman of Wild Orchids Southern Africa and is also a member of the Witwatersrand Orchid Society.



**Andrew Hankey** is the Specialist Horticulturist at the Walter Sisulu National Botanical Garden in Roodepoort, South Africa, where he has worked since 1993. An author of numerous

scientific, technical and popular articles, he regularly gives talks, lectures and courses on various subjects pertaining to South African plants. His taxonomic research interest is in the Hyacinthaceae Section Ledebourinae where he is contributing towards the understanding of this taxonomically complex group of bulbous plants.