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## **SANSEVIERIAS: AN INTRODUCTION**

**By Colin C. Walker (c.walker702@btinternet.com)**

### **Introduction**

*Sansevieria* is a genus with a widespread distribution throughout Africa and Arabia and eastwards to Sri Lanka, India and Myanmar. Many have thick underground rhizomes whilst others produce stolons above the ground. Leaves vary from flat and barely succulent to thick and very succulent, circular in cross-section. Flowers are produced in unbranched tall spikes, large branching inflorescences or dense, crowded (capitate) heads. The flowers are always nocturnal, each lasting a single night but since large numbers are produced a plant can be in flower over the course of a week or more. Most produce intense hyacinth-like scents although a few appear to be scentless. Typically flowers are most fragrant late in the evening with scent fading by the following morning. Copious nectar is usually produced by extra-floral nectaries at the flower bases which can drip leaving sticky patches on the leaves.

Sansevierias in my experience are best grown as houseplants so they can be watered all the year around. They certainly do best in temperatures above 12°C and even higher temperatures are recommended. Most are readily propagated from stem or leaf cuttings, although the variegated cultivars need to be propagated from stems since they do not come true from leaves. Many grow quite fast but some species such as *S. ehrenbergii*, *S. hallii*, *S. pfisteri*, and *S. pinguicula* are relatively, or even exceptionally, slow growing. Most are relatively

shade-tolerant, hence their success as houseplants.

There is a new book on the genus hot off the press (Webb & Newton, 2022) (Fig. 1) which should do much to publicise the genus as it provides an up to date reference source. These authors accept 89 species plus 16 subspecies or varieties and new species are being discovered and named on a regular basis. Additionally, not covered in this book, there are many named cultivars, especially variegates, so there is a wide range of plants to choose from. Here I have selected my favourite seven.

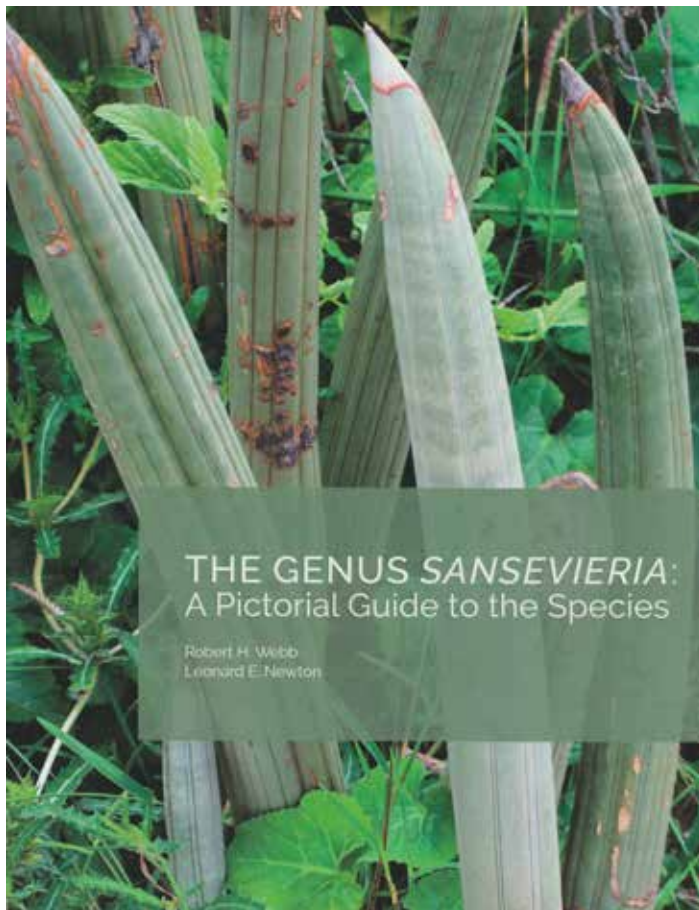


Figure 1: Latest book on the genus (Webb & Newton, 2022).

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***Sansevieria hargeisana***

*Sansevieria hargeisana* was described in 1994 from a collection made by John Lavranos on a 1969–1970 expedition near Hargeisa in what is now the Somaliland Protectorate and to date it has not been recorded from any other location. My plant (Fig. 2), which has been in my collection for 12 years, now has four rosettes with leaves up to 35 cm long arranged dichotomously, although each rosette has a slight twist to it. Three more new rosettes are also starting to develop. The leaves are cylindrical and round in cross-section for much of their length, with a shallow channel at the base with pronounced cartilaginous rust to fawn margins and with a sharp dried tip at the apex marked with rust at its base. As with many sansevierias the leaves are attractively cross-banded in darker green, with at least 7 dark green longitudinal lines and a slightly rough texture to the surface. In contrast young leaves are flatter, shallowly-channelled and not cylindrical.



Figure 2: *Sansevieria hargeisana*.  
Photo: Colin Walker.



Figure 3: *Sansevieria hargeisana* close up of flowers. Photo: Colin Walker.

At the BCSS Glasgow Branch Show in 2022, first prize in the *Sansevieria* class went to my plant of *S. hargeisana* now in an attractive glossy black glazed ceramic pan, 27 cm in diameter. Most excitingly though, the plant was in flower for the very first time. The single inflorescence (Fig. 3) was only 15 cm tall, bearing flowers about 4.5 cm long of which 2 cm is the flower tube. Each flower lasted for just a single night, as is typical of sansevierias, enhanced with the trademark hyacinth-like scent.

### ***Sansevieria subspicata***

*Sansevieria subspicata* (Fig. 4) is flat-leafed and branches underground without a visible above-ground stem. Its leaves are up to 40 cm long and 7 cm across at the widest mid-point, tapering above and below. The surface is roughened like very fine sandpaper, mid green in colour with slight darker cross-banding and a distinct channel, especially towards the leaf base.

My plant has been in the collection for 27 years and has grown steadily, making it a handsome plant deserving of an attractive container. Its current dark glossy blue pot contrasts well with the green foliage. It won second prize prize at the 2022 Glasgow Branch Show and part of the appeal for the judge was likely the fact that it was also in flower with two stout spikes (hence the name *subspicata* meaning 'more or less spike-like'), the tallest of which grew to 78 cm. Flowers are arranged mainly in pairs (Fig. 5), each flower being 5 cm long of which the tube is 3 cm long.

This species is recorded as being endemic to Mozambique, from where it was first collected at Delagoa Bay (now Mupato) on the southeast coast.

### ***Sansevieria hallii***

This species of *Sansevieria* has been in cultivation since the 1950s and was known as *Sansevieria* 'Baseball Bat' because of the leaf shape, until it was formally described as *Sansevieria hallii* in 1996.

I have grown this species for 25 years and in my care it is very slow-growing. Mature leaves are highly succulent and indeed baseball bat-shaped. In my



Figure 4: *Sansevieria subspicata*.  
Photo: Colin Walker.



Figure 5: *Sansevieria subspicata*  
close up of flowers.  
Photo: Colin Walker.

largest specimen leaves are at most 30 cm long but are recorded to grow up to 60 cm or more in length. These have a deep round channel with acute membranous edges, pronounced longitudinal lines with somewhat indistinct horizontal banding and a roughened surface.

I have only flowered this species once. It belongs to a group of about 10 species that produce capitulate inflorescences with a 'head' of flowers, unlike the majority of sansevierias that have tall, elongated flower spikes. The inflorescence (Fig. 6) is produced below soil level with each flower being about 10 cm long, white with a pink tinge and a slight fragrance reminiscent of hyacinth.

*Sansevieria hallii* was originally described from south east Zimbabwe but is now known to occur in neighbouring South Africa and Mozambique. The species is reasonably variable and a number of cultivars are available including 'Blue Bat'



Figure 6: *Sansevieria hallii* in flower.  
Photo: Colin Walker.

and 'Pink Bat'.

The species name commemorates Harry Hall (1906–1986) who collected the original plant. He was a British succulent plant enthusiast who spent half his life in South Africa as curator of succulents at Kirstenbosch Botanic Garden, Cape Town.

### ***Sansevieria francisii***

Francis or Frank Horwood (1924–1987) was a doyen of succulent plant propagators. He moved from the UK to California in 1975 where he worked at Lotusland and Abbey Garden Nursery. He visited Africa several times, notably Ethiopia, Kenya and Somalia. In 1982 Frank collected an unidentified *Sansevieria* at Garsen near the coast in Kenya which was distributed in cultivation under the collection number *FKH 432*. This was later named *Sansevieria francisii* in his honour.

It has erect stems up to 30 cm tall, that branch irregularly by means of stolons up to 25 cm long produced at various places along the stems and are covered in triangular sheaths. The plant tends to become floppy, a bit triffid-like and untidy (Fig. 7). Its leaves are up to 25 cm long, arranged in five tiers – giving it a distinct appearance – mainly circular in cross-section, tapering towards a sharp pointed tip and channelled at the base. These are dark green in colour and distinctly cross-branded in greyish green.

In my experience *S. francisii* flowers freely even as a small plant, making it highly desirable in cultivation. Its inflorescence is unbranched up to 30 cm tall, bearing flowers that are mottled dusky pink on the outside but ivory coloured internally and up to 3 cm long.



Figure 7: *Sansevieria francisii*.  
Photo: Colin Walker



Figure 8: *Sansevieria trifasciata* 'Hahnii' in Percy Pig Pot.

Photo: Colin Walker.



### ***Sansevieria trifasciata* 'Hahnii'**

*Sansevieria trifasciata* has been in cultivation for over 200 years but it was only named in 1903. It is the well-known 'Mother in Law's Tongue' and as such is a very common house plant and probably the commonest sansevieria in cultivation since it has been widely propagated. The name '*trifasciata*' means "having three bands", named for the naturally mottled leaves. It rarely flowers in cultivation. The species comes from southern Nigeria but it is widely naturalised worldwide.

There are numerous cultivars of this species, many of which are variegated. The typical ones have long, relatively narrow leaves but in contrast 'Hahnii' (Fig. 8) has shorter, broader leaves. Some variegated forms of this have silvery leaves. It is shown here in a novelty pot featuring the well known UK food character Percy Pig, a Christmas present from my wife. This plant is easy to grow and is probably ready for a repot.



***Sansevieria ehrenbergii***

This is a large, slow-growing plant (Fig. 9) with a stem up to 25 cm tall at maturity. Its long narrow leaves are up to 1.8 m long and remain distichous (2-ranked) even at maturity, whereas many other species have distichous leaves when juvenile and become rosulate with age. The leaves are rounded below with a shallow channel above, have a sharp tip and a reddish-brown margin. It is widespread in Arabia, the horn of Africa and tropical E. Africa ranging from the Yemen south to Uganda. My plant has yet to flower after 10 years in the collection but when it does the inflorescence will be up to 2 m tall and well branched, unlike all the other species discussed here.



Figure 9: *Sansevieria ehrenbergii*.  
Photo: Colin Walker.



Figure 10: *Sansevieria pinguicula*.  
Photo: Colin Walker.

### ***Sansevieria pinguicula***

This is a very distinctive, attractive and slow-growing species making it choice, popular and highly show-worthy. It was named *pinguicula* from the Latin *pinguis* meaning “somewhat fat”, for the fattish leaves (Fig. 10). Its leaves are up to 30 cm long, rosulate with up to 9 leaves per rosette. Each leaf is grooved and rounded below with a broad wide channel above bordered by a prominent horny margin, bluish-green in colour with no cross-branding, tapering to a sharp point. There is also *S. pinguicula* f. *disticha* which like *S. ehrenbergii* has distichous leaves at maturity. The plant spreads via stolons so that its growth form is akin to the runners of strawberries spreading along the surface of the ground. The new growth then sends roots vertically down into the ground at a raised position, thus making the plant look like it is growing on stilts, hence it is known as the “walking sansevieria” in Kenya where it is endemic.

In my 20 years of growing this species just a single plant has flowered and

only once. The spike was simple, unbranched and no more than 10 cm tall. It is, however, described as producing branched inflorescences but smaller than those of *S. ehrenbergii* being only about 30 cm tall.

### Reference

Webb, R.H. & Newton, L.E. (2022) *The genus Sansevieria. A pictorial guide to the species.* Arid Lands Greenhouses, Tucson, Arizona.



## VALE: WILLIAM (BILL) HARLAND 20/05/2022

**Kim Hamilton**

News was received whilst we were setting up for our Autumn Show that Life Member, Bill Harland had passed away that morning.

Bill, with his wife Sybil, joined the Society in 1962 and soon immersed themselves in the Society's activities. They both started writing articles for the journal in 1964 and, in 1966, Bill was invited to join the Society's committee. In March the following year he was elected President. Bill served as President from 1967 to 1976 and then again in 1979 to 1981. Bill eventually retired from the committee in 1984.

In 1968, study groups were formed for the following genera: *Gymnocalycium* (their first meeting was just prior to June 1968), *Haworthia* (first meeting March 1968) and *Mammillaria* (I was unable to establish when they had their first meeting). Each of these groups would meet monthly, with Sybil interested in