

News from Illegal Plant Trade Coalition

IPTC Newsletter #1: October 2025

Welcome to the first Illegal Plant Trade Coalition Newsletter!

In this first ever issue, we will be sharing with you our partners' action in addressing illegal plant poaching and trade. The stories come from across the globe, showcasing the global, diverse nature of the illegal plant trade as experienced by our partners.



Launching the Coalition

Today at the IUCN World Conservation Congress in Abu Dhabi, Botanic Gardens Conservation International (BGCI) is announcing the launch of the Illegal Plant Trade Coalition (IPTC). This alliance of diverse and global partners is working together to address, understand, and mitigate the illegal plant trade. The Coalition encourages everyone in the chain of sale, from harvesting to the end consumer of plants, to Think Twice and Trade Right. The launch event is supported by the IUCN Commission on Communications and Education and the Coalition's Keystone Partners in the US, Canada and South Africa.

The illegal trade in plants is a growing crisis that a single organisation cannot tackle alone. The impact of the illegal trade is causing plant extinctions and putting many species at risk in the wild, with succulents, cacti, cycads and orchids being the most frequently targeted for ornamental trade. The loss of species is leading to ecosystem disruption and is contributing to the loss of valuable cultural and traditional knowledge. The prevalence of legal online trade in plants accelerates the risk to species illegally harvested from the wild, as it has enabled sellers and buyers, who traditionally may have never been in contact, to trade with relative ease and limited detection.

"The illegal plant trade is one of the most immediate threats to plant biodiversity worldwide," said Carly Cowell, BGCI's Director of Policy and Practice. "It undermines the integrity of ecosystems and erodes the planet's ability to be resilient and support life. Through the Illegal Plant Trade Coalition, BGCI is working with botanic gardens, enforcement agencies, and communities to change behaviours, raise awareness, and build practical tools that empower people to make sustainable choices and protect threatened species."

On 26 July 2023, BGCI's International Advisory Council, made up of 38 botanic garden directors across six continents, agreed that global public awareness is urgently needed to stop the illegal plant trade and

promote sustainable alternatives. Since 2023, the Coalition has been building momentum, and is now led by a Steering Committee of nine Keystone Partners who have taken up the call to action and are dedicating their time and resources to prevent plant extinctions from illegal trade.

Over the last 18 months the Coalition has been undertaking research and designing a variety of tools to help gardens, academic organisations, conservation organisations, communities, plant sellers and consumers tackle the illegal plant trade. These assets and tools are available to the Coalition's partners. At this initial stage of the Coalitions' development, the toolkit includes posters, flyers, leaflets, presentations, case studies and other social media assets. The toolkit will continue to grow under the guidance of partners, with information documents and learning modules already in the works. The tools offer organisational staff the opportunity to grow their understanding of the global issue of illegal plant trade, what to keep an eye out for and what can be done to mitigate the illegal trade. Tools aimed at garden visitors aim to raise awareness of this, often, unknown crisis and provide information towards making ethical and sustainable purchases.

With the official launch now underway, the Coalition is ready to work with more partners interested in shaping the Coalition, and calls on BGCI members to join as Action Partners, organisations with additional resources to join as Keystone Partners, and interested parties to join as Outreach Partners. More information is available on the 'get involved' section of our [webpage](#) and the last page of this newsletter.

Thank you for helping us shift the conversation on illegal wildlife trafficking from fauna to include flora.



Find out more about our Keystone Partners

Longwood Gardens

Science in Action at Longwood Gardens: Safeguarding Rare Plants



**LONGWOOD
GARDENS**

Longwood Gardens stewards more than 1,600 acres of conservation land across Pennsylvania and Delaware. Each year, more than 1.7 million people experience the public areas of these gardens and landscapes as guests, while other areas are carefully managed for research, restoration, and the protection of biodiversity. This balance of beauty and stewardship reflects our belief that every garden can be both a place of inspiration and a force for conservation.



Arethusa bulbosa survey.

Credit: Kristie Lane Anderson & Longwood Gardens

Our science programme anchors this work. Through global plant exploration, Longwood scientists join with partners worldwide to document, research, and protect species facing mounting pressures. Exploration is not only about discovery it is a commitment to global plant conservation and the collaborations that make it possible. From this foundation, we apply the skills of conservation horticulture: developing propagation protocols, advancing sustainable growing practices, and building resilient living collections. By leveraging our horticultural expertise in these ways, we help ensure that plants at risk from climate change, habitat loss, and the illegal plant trade can endure and continue to inspire for generations to come.

As a member of a global network of gardens and conservation organisations, Longwood is proud to contribute its expertise to collective efforts like the Illegal Plant Trade Coalition. Together, we are raising awareness, sharing solutions, and ensuring that plants and the ecosystems and communities they support endure for generations to come.



At Longwood Gardens, science is a call to action. It fuels our responsibility not only to steward our own landscapes, but also to confront global threats that place plants and the people who depend on them at risk. Among today's pressing challenges is the illegal plant trade, which threatens wild populations but also creates an urgent opportunity for conservation action and global collaboration.

One powerful example of this challenge can be found in Tanzania, a nation rich in biodiversity and home to thousands of terrestrial orchids. These remarkable plants are being harvested unsustainably for chikanda, a regional delicacy whose rising popularity has created a booming black market. With an estimated 85 species now imperiled and millions of tubers exported illegally each year, the future of these orchids hangs in the balance.



Left: *Satyrium monadenum*, One of the most commonly harvested orchids for chikanda. Credit: Peter Zale & Longwood Gardens.



Top: Evidence of Orchid Poaching in Tanzania. Credit: Peter Zale & Longwood Gardens.



Left: *Disa robusta* Kitulo, One of the most commonly harvested orchids for Chikanda. Credit: Peter Zale & Longwood Gardens.

In response, Longwood Gardens has joined forces with the Tanzania Plant Health and Pesticides Authority, the National Herbarium of Tanzania, and the Tanzania Sansevieria Foundation to take action. Fieldwork in the Southern Highlands, including Kitulo National Park—the only national park in Tanzania designated specifically for plants—has documented dozens of orchid populations and produced hundreds of herbarium specimens. More than 60 seed collections are now secured, and Longwood scientists are pioneering propagation research that could provide a lifeline for these species.

The long-term vision reaches beyond conservation alone. By developing propagation protocols that can be scaled into agricultural enterprises, we aim to create sustainable alternatives to wild harvesting—reducing pressure on fragile ecosystems while offering new opportunities for local communities. It is a vision rooted in partnership, innovation, and hope.

Our work in Tanzania is one example of the global collaboration needed to confront the illegal plant trade. Longwood is proud to stand alongside many organisations around the world, all bringing their unique expertise and commitment to safeguarding plants for the future. By working together—through science, horticulture, education, and advocacy—we are helping to ensure that the story of threatened plants does not end in loss, but in resilience.

Every orchid seed sown, every plant protected, is an act of faith in the future. Together, we can turn the tide of illegal trade, safeguard the irreplaceable, and inspire a world where the beauty and diversity of plants continue to flourish for generations to come.

Lessons from South Africa, Conservation Horticulture as a Template for Action

By Nora Mulcahy

Introduction

The Succulent Karoo biome (SKB) in South Africa is a biodiversity hotspot found nowhere else on earth. Since 2019, there has been a dramatic increase in the illegal harvesting of succulent plant species for the ornamental plant trade, particularly from the SKB. South Africa is experiencing an unprecedented loss of rare and endemic species as a direct result of plant poaching. Given this threat in South Africa, the South African National Biodiversity Institute (SANBI) are part of the founding organisations of the Illegal Plant Trade Coalition. They now are Keystone Partners and sit on the Steering Committee, bringing unique insight from a biodiverse country that is unfortunately a current hotspot for illegal plant trade.

In late 2023, the Scientific Coordinator seconded from WWF-SA to the SANBI immediately recognised the urgent need for more horticultural staff. An appeal for assistance was made by SANBI in 2023 at the BGCI International Advisory Council meeting and this was taken up by BGCI as part of its work on the Illegal Plant Trade Coalition. The result was that the National Botanic Gardens of Ireland (NBGI) sent an experienced horticulturist to SANBI for three months in 2024 and two months in 2025. Through this collaborative example, the international botanic gardens community can take coordinated, practical steps to provide horticultural assistance to South Africa and other regions in need.

Target species

Leaf succulents, caudiciform and bulb species are the primary targets of plant poaching from the SKB (1), however, trends are constantly in flux. SANBI is responsible for the management of South Africa's botanical gardens. Hundreds of thousands of confiscated succulent species sit in SANBI facilities, yet SANBI does not have enough staff and resources to adequately care for them. Due to budget cuts as a result of world economic stresses, staff recruitment is at a standstill. Funding for much-needed additional SANBI staff is required to deal with this massive influx of additional plant material to care for, without which the result is the tragic loss of plants.

(1) Prinsloo, P., Burger, M. & Newton, D. (2024). *A Succulent Trade: The legal and illegal trade in succulent flora stemming from South Africa*. TRAFFIC International, Cambridge, United Kingdom.



Plant processing room - Before and after.
Credit: Nora Mulcahy



Left: Nora Mulcahy with Sicelo Sithole, a Joan Wrench scholarship intern. Credit: Nora Mulcahy



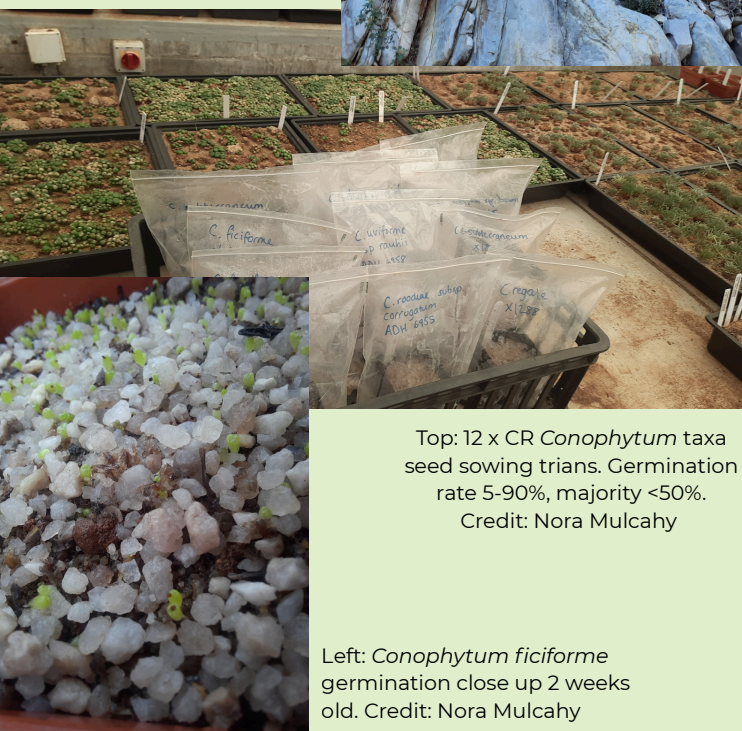
Right: Nora Mulcahy and Dylan Nutt hand pollinating at Kirstenbosch BG. Credit: Domitilla Raimondo



Top: L - R Keenan, Donavan Kirkwood, Ismail Abraham, Emily Kudze, Clare, Nora Mulcahy, Keith O Meara, Annerie. Font: Tristian Kruger. Seed sowing workshop at Kirstenbosch NBG. Credit: Emily Kudze



Right: Nora Mulcahy, Sicelo Sithelo & Tristian Kruger retrieving seed of *Amaryllis paradisicola* in the Richtersveld. Credit: Dylan Nutt



Top: 12 x CR *Conophytum* taxa seed sowing trays. Germination rate 5-90%, majority <50%.
Credit: Nora Mulcahy

Left: *Conophytum ficiforme* germination close up 2 weeks old. Credit: Nora Mulcahy

A memorandum of understanding was created between SANBI and NBGI ensuring the ongoing provision of assistance in South Africa. Funding for 2024 was generously provided by the Irish Museums Trust (IMT). The primary outcomes included the direct planting of ca 6,000-8,000 priority species and improving conditions and therefore longevity of 1000's more. Additional outcomes in 2024 include:

- Species inventory completed at two SANBI facilities.
- Enabled triage system to prioritise Critically Endangered and Endangered species (Fig 1).
- Planting up of Critically Endangered and Endangered species.
- Provision of mentorship to the intern responsible for care of confiscated plants (Fig 2).
- Peer to peer knowledge and skills exchange.

Following the success of 2024, and with support from the Office of Public Works (OPW) and the IMT, another horticulturist assisted at SANBI for two weeks in 2025. In this short amount of time, they managed to improve the infrastructure of the succulent conservation collection and also shared his knowledge on how to automate irrigation processes.

Additional outcomes from 2025 include:

- Species inventory completed in one facility.
- Hand pollination of priority species (Fig. 3).
- Assisted SANBI field trip team (CREW) with monitoring / seed collection / reintroduction trial location mapping in the Northern Cape (Fig. 4).
- Collaborative seed sowing workshop, with a focus on peer to peer learning, skills and knowledge sharing (Fig. 5).
- Seed sowing trials of 12 x Critically Endangered *Conophytum* species (Fig 6).
- Establishment of a secondment system.
- Strengthening existing collaborations: SANBI, Custodians of Endangered Wildflowers (CREW), the Botanical Society of South Africa (BotSoc SA).
- Initiated new collaborations, e.g. Stellenbosch University Botanical Gardens (SUBG); Richtersveld Botanical Gardens.

Future plans

By providing immediate horticultural assistance, NBGI has initiated a mechanism for direct response through collaborative action. The success of the secondments so far and the continuing crisis in South Africa, has created momentum with NBGI and other organisations in Ireland, South Africa and the botanic garden community. This includes collaborating on future grants and plans for a greater number of secondments in 2026, all towards saving species from extinction and building capacity in SANBI gardens.

Community Vigilance Halts Trafficking of Rare Plants in Puntland, Somalia Dozens of Endangered Saplings Saved



By Species Saviour Initiative, Puntland Samolia

A timely tip from a concerned citizen through the Species Saviour Initiative (SSI) community hotline led to the interception of a major illegal plant trafficking operation on September 13, 2024, marking a significant victory for conservation efforts in Somalia.

SSI's hotline—Somalia's first-ever dedicated community-based mechanism for reporting environmental crimes—has become a lifeline for conservation enforcement. Designed to ensure anonymity, safety, and rapid communication, it empowers local people to discreetly report poaching, illegal logging, and trafficking of threatened species. In hotspot areas, SSI has trained dozens of community members on how to recognise and report incidents. Trained personnel then verify incoming information before taking appropriate action and coordinate directly with authorities, bridging the critical gap between remote communities and law enforcement.

In this case, SSI immediately alerted the Puntland Police Commissioner's Office, prompting a swift response. Security forces intercepted a vehicle near Garowe, where 65 saplings of globally threatened and endemic species were discovered. These included *Acacia bussei*, *Dirachma somalensis*, *Boswellia sacra*, *Boswellia frereana*, *Commiphora myrrha*, *Commiphora guidottii*, *Gymnocarpus gracilicaulis*, and *Ceratonia oreothauma* subsp. *somalensis*—species highly prized for resin, medicine, and horticultural rarity.

The saplings wrapped in tarpaulins sheets, were destined for illegal trade. Although three suspects fled, two were arrested on-site. Thanks to close collaboration between SSI and local authorities, the confiscated plants were successfully replanted across four ecologically suitable sites, transforming what could have been a devastating loss into an act of restoration. SSI continues to monitor the health of the replanted saplings and is working to expand this community watch program to other vulnerable areas.

"This shows what we can achieve when communities and authorities work together," said Abdirisak Abdulkadir Ibrahim, SSI's Programs Coordinator. "One person speaking up saved 65 trees. Imagine the impact we can have together."

This interception—one of the largest of its kind in Puntland—underscores both the growing threat of illegal plant trafficking and the power of community-driven vigilance. By building trust, ensuring anonymity, and fostering collaboration with law enforcement, SSI's hotline is proving to be an innovative model for real-time conservation action in Somalia.



Boswellia frereana fields in Golis Mountains. Credit: SSI



Boswellia saplings that were confiscated. Credit SSI

About Species Saviour Initiative (SSI)

Based in Puntland, SSI works with local communities to safeguard Somalia's endangered species and fragile ecosystems through hands-on conservation, education, and building a future where people and nature flourish together.

For more information, or to learn how you can support our work, please reach out:

info@speciessaviour.org

<https://speciessaviour.org/>

The Experience of the Bauru Municipal Botanical Garden with the Educational Campaign “Illegal Trade is Not Legal – Everyone Against the Illegal Trade of Plants”

By Bauru Municipal Botanical Garden

Combating the illegal plant trade is one of the great challenges of the 21st century in the field of biodiversity conservation. In Brazil, due to its continental size, extensive borders, wide variety of biomes and vegetation, and being one of the most biodiverse countries in the world, addressing the issue of the illegal plant trade is of enormous relevance but also a major challenge.

Encouraged by BGCI's work in 2024 on the Technical Review of botanic gardens tackling the illegal plant trade, the Bauru Botanical Garden began to study the issue of illegal plant trade in Brazil. We started with a review and reflections on what had already been done on this topic and how we could contribute.

In Brazil, there are official agencies responsible for monitoring and seizing plants sold illegally. In this context, the Bauru Botanical Garden has a very positive track record of partnerships with these agencies in receiving seized biological materials.



Receipt of and screening of seized material by the Environmental Police and the Postal Service. Credit: JB Bauru

We noticed that in the media, major outlets give far more attention to the illegal trade in fauna than in flora. The issue of plants is rarely reported.

Thus, we concluded that our contribution to this issue could occur mainly in the educational field, bringing this topic into the spotlight of our work to raise awareness and inform our community - especially the children who visit us for environmental education events. This way, we have the opportunity to influence new generations and reduce “plant blindness,” helping to emphasise the importance of plants.

During the development of the campaign, we were invited to join the Illegal Plant Trade Coalition (IPTC): Think Twice, Trade Right. We became an Action Partner of the Coalition, positioning ourselves as part of a global initiative to combat the illegal plant trade in our region. This commitment drives us to develop educational activities, guidance, and local actions in defense of plants.

Plant conservation is the core mission of botanical gardens worldwide. These institutions hold the credentials and legitimacy to address this issue before society, contributing not only through flora conservation, collections, and specific projects but also through educational initiatives.



Left: Presentation of the campaign at a Fair for legalised plant sales – 14th CEAGESP in Bloom. Credit: JB Bauru



Bottom: Campaign outreach to the Environmental Military Police. Credit: JB Bauru

The Francisco Javier Clavijero Botanic Garden, a leader garden in Mexico's plant conservation and education

By M. Díaz-Toribio, O. Gómez García & N. Corona



The Francisco Javier Clavijero Botanic Garden (JBC), with a 48-year trajectory, is recognised as a public space that promotes environmental culture and science and serves as the point of contact between INECOL and society. Its living plant collection is used to generate scientific knowledge that supports conservation, environmental education, and community engagement.

By meeting the highest international standards in leadership, collection management, horticulture, public education, scientific outreach, community and cultural engagement, conservation actions, research, staff capacity, participation in local, national, and international networks, and sustainable practices, the JBC holds BGCI Accreditation, and is the headquarter of the Hub Mexico of the Global Biodiversity Standard. It is also listed at Level 2 in the ArbNet network.

Naturally, it is also an ideal site for tourism, outdoor recreation, and the observation of plants, fungi, birds, insects, or simply for a walk in nature. In 2019, it was honoured as part of the Top 10 North American Gardens Worth Travelling for Award.

As a leader in scientific knowledge generation, threatened species conservation, environmental education, and societal engagement, the Clavijero Botanic Garden is uniquely positioned to influence the mitigation and eventual control of illegal plant trade in Xalapa and the surrounding region. In this effort, the educational program Fairchild Challenge plays a fundamental role.

In the Xalapa and Coatepec region, the illegal trade of wild plants—especially orchids, bromeliads, cacti, ferns, and other groups—poses a direct threat to local biodiversity. In response, the Clavijero Botanic Garden, part of the Instituto de Ecología A.C., has taken an active role in addressing this issue through strategies of environmental education, ex situ conservation, and community outreach.

One of its pillars is the Fairchild Challenge, an international initiative that encourages youth participation in scientific, artistic, and social challenges related to the environment. Through this program, the Clavijero Botanic Garden has successfully raised awareness among hundreds of students and families in Veracruz about the importance of conserving native plants and avoiding their illegal extraction.

Additional resources that can be explored include educational campaigns against the illegal trade of orchids, bromeliads, cacti, and other plants; the creation of illustrated botanical fact sheets that promote knowledge of protected species; visual and artistic narratives that connect the beauty of plants with their ecological and cultural value; and school-based research—from elementary to higher education—on the impact of illegal trade on local ecosystems.

By integrating science, art, and social action, the Clavijero Botanic Garden transforms environmental education into a powerful tool to curb illegal extraction and foster respect for native flora.

In a context where local markets still display wild species without authorization, the Clavijero Botanic Garden's approach demonstrates that conservation begins with education—and that young people can be agents of change in defending Veracruz's natural heritage.



Something for everybody!

The Illegal Plant Trade Coalition Tiered Partnership Explained

Everyone has a place in the Illegal Plant Trade Coalition. We know people and organisations bring different concerns, skills, and resources, and that's a strength. As such, we have developed a tiered partnership model. As part of this model, each level of engagement provides varying degrees of access to, and flexibility in adapting the Coalition materials to suit events and audiences.

To ensure consistent use of the core messages, aims, and objectives of the IPTC across all collaborators, we require partners to sign a broad and informal, but mandatory, agreement. This puts in place mechanisms for communicating, sharing updates and tracking progress on an annual basis.

Explore our Keystone, Action and Outreach Partnership options below and get in touch when you are ready to sign up!

Keystone Partners	Action Partners
Opportunity to join the Steering Committee - provide leadership, design input & implementation ideas	Access to all static IPTC materials
Your logo and brand on IPTC materials and website	The IPTC suite of logos to be added across resoueces
Ability to access templates and edit IPTC materials to fit organisational brand	Named partner on the IPTC website
Direct support in implementing IPTC materials	Be supported and have opportunities to collaborate with Keystone Partners
Early access to events, materials and invites to present and share your work.	
	Outreach Partners
	Access to public facing IPTC materials & invites to events
	Be part of a global Coalition and our worldwide messaging

Every voice matters in shaping how we tackle the illegal plant trade together - We at the Coalition want to ensure we are heading in the right direction to address wild plant extinction.

Concerned about your contribution to the Coalition, but working in wild plant extinction hotspots? Don't worry we will find a partnership that works for you!

Global action for wild plant preservation begins with collective commitment - thank you for being part of it.

Together we can extend the conversation on conservation from fauna to include flora.

Think Twice, Trade Right

For more information reach us at policy@bgci.org