

Associate professor Dr. Sergej Mochnacký – 70 years

On August 18, 2023, assoc. prof. Sergej Mochnacký, longtime director of the Botanical Garden (1989-2018) and one of the founders of the journal *Thaiszia – Journal of Botany*, in which he worked as the Editor-in-Chief for many years, celebrated his 70th birthday.



Sergej was born in 1953 in the town of Snina in eastern Slovakia. After completing his studies at the General Secondary School in Bardejov, he

continued his studies at the Faculty of Science of the Pavol Jozef Šafárik University in Košice. In 1976 he was graduated from the University as a teacher of general education subjects - biology and chemistry and later, in 1981, he obtained the degree of Doctor of Natural Sciences (RNDr.). He was awarded the scientific rank of Candidate of Science (CSc.) in Botany by the Slovak Academy of Sciences in 1988 for his thesis "Segetal Vegetation of the Eastern Slovak Lowlands". In 2000 he received the title of associate professor after defending his habilitation thesis "Syntaxonomy of segetal communities of Slovakia" at the Technical University in Zvolen in the field of Forestry Phytology.

After completing his university studies, he worked for a short time as a teacher and educator, later as a specialist at the Veterinary College in Košice and the Slovak Academy of Sciences. On January 15, 1988, he became the director of the Botanical Garden in Košice and spent more than 30 long years in this position until the end of April 2018, when he retired. In 2019, he was awarded the silver medal of UPJŠ for the development of the Pavol Jozef Šafárik University in Košice.

During his tenure as the Director of the Botanical Garden of UPJŠ, significant changes took place. Within less than two years of taking the office, the so-called Velvet Revolution took place in Czechoslovakia, when the power of the Communist Party in the state was eliminated. Sergej remained the director even after this change and nothing changed even after the division of Czechoslovakia and the establishment of the Slovak Republic in 1993. After taking office and after the social changes that took place, it was necessary to change the concept of the Botanical Garden and to define it as a scientific-pedagogical workplace of the University. It was very difficult to make significant changes in the Botanic Garden in the 1990s. As a part of rationalisation measures, the financial subsidy from the state and the university

decreased, the number of staff decreased by more than one third (at certain period there were only 39 staff members). At the same time, it was impossible to draw project funds from various grant schemes, as a significant part of the important land of the Botanical Garden belonged back to the Dominican Order after 1990 (according to some sources, illegally, despite a valid court decision). Despite these conditions, Sergej managed to push through the initiative of Ing. Vlastimil Mikoláš and Dr. Pavol Mártonfi and from 1991, the scientific journal *Thaiszia - Journal of Botany* began to be published in BZ, which over time became indexed in various world databases. By exchanging it for journals from other institutions and acquiring review copies of books, the library of the Botanical Garden has been significantly enriched. The Director also managed to find resources for a generous revitalization of the Botanical Garden herbarium (registered in the international Index Herbariorum under the abbreviation KO), which has become a suitable space for all researchers in the field of botany (more about it can be found in the article Mártonfiová et al. 2021). The lack of investment in infrastructure in the past required large investments in the modernization of existing greenhouses and facilities, as well as in the purchase of equipment. Since there were not enough resources, some things succeeded, others remained in the plans. The modernization of the main exhibition greenhouses, buying new equipment, building new growing greenhouses, own well, etc. were achieved. Some of the projects were hampered by the aforementioned problems with the lease of the land on which the Botanical Garden stood. The successful initiative of Sergej in this respect became very provident. In cooperation with the components of the institutional nature conservation in Slovakia, since 2002, the Botanical Garden was successfully included in the system of protected areas as "Protected area of the Košice Botanical Garden" with an area of almost 30 ha. This contributed to better prospects for the survival of the Botanical Garden at the time when the Dominican Order was trying to sell off the land under the Botanical Garden. The implementation of these efforts would have been devastating for the Botanical Garden. Fortunately, thanks to the efforts of the Rector of P. J. Šafárik University and the cooperation of the Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport and the Ministry of Finance, it was possible to buy the land in 2014 for the benefit of P. J. Šafárik University and thus for the Botanical Garden itself.

Associate professor Mochnacký was also active in science during his tenure as Director of the Botanical Garden, although his management activities in the Botanical Garden gradually limited the overall possibilities of his scientific work. Nevertheless, he is the author of 77 publications, in one case as a co-author of a monograph, he is also the author of university textbooks, 5 papers in the journals indexed in CC and another 40 scientific papers in other journals, and he has published various other publications (bibliography is published in Kelbel 2023). Sergej lectured several courses for students at the Faculty of Science of P. J. Šafárik University and supervised 12 diploma and 2 rigorosum theses. He was at the birth of a very popular project "Botanikiáda", prepared by the staff of the Botanical Garden and the Rector's Office staff. "Botanikiáda" is a competition for pupils of 5th grades of primary schools,

which continues even after Sergej's retirement and forced covid break. During the directorship of Sergej Mochnacký, the organization of several very popular thematic exhibitions in the Botanical Garden began, e.g., Orchids - Gems in the Plant Kingdom, Butterflies of the Exotic Tropics, Exhibition of Bonsai, Beekeeping, Citruses and Palms, Cacti and Succulents - the Prickly Beauty of Plants, and others. In 2000 he took part on an expedition to Nicaragua, from where plants were brought to enrich the collection and the exhibition of tropical plants.

Within the Slovak Botanical Society (SBS) at the Slovak Academy of Sciences Sergej Mochnacký was awarded with the title of Honorary Member of the SBS and the Holuby Commemorative Medal in 2013. The results of the work of the entire Botanical Garden team under his leadership were awarded in 2014 with the Prize of the Košice Self-Governing Region for outstanding results of the transfer of the collected knowledge from the plant kingdom among the general public with the aim of strengthening the sustainability of a favourable environment. In 2018 he was awarded the bronze medal of the Faculty of Science of P. J. Šafárik University for the development of cooperation between the Botanical Garden and the Institute of Biological and Ecological Sciences of the Faculty of Science of P. J. Šafárik University and finally in 2019 he was awarded the silver medal of P. J. Šafárik University for his personal contribution to the development of the Pavol Jozef Šafárik University in Košice.



Doc. RNDr. Sergej Mochnacký, CSc. working in the High Tatras (lake Vyšné Temnosmrečinské pleso).

After retiring at his own request in 2018, Sergej devotes himself to his hobbies, his private garden and perhaps his passion for hunting, but above all to his family, his wife RNDr. Nadežda Mochnacká and his children Igor and Iveta and his grandchildren. He likes to visit the Botanical Garden of P. J. Šafárik University during various events, exhibition openings, and he likes to observe how the institution he devoted himself to for many years continues to develop. And so, we also wish him many more years of health and well-being.

References

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