Succulents for Leisure and Pleasure, for Education and Science:
The Zürich Succulent Plant Collection—80 years in the service of succulent plant popularization

A short history of the Collection

The roots of the Zürich Succulent Plant Collection go back to the years around 1920. At that time, Jakob Gasser (1870 – 1932) operated a specialized cactus nursery in Zürich. Due to health reasons, Gasser was forced to give up his business and collection, and he intended to sell the plants individually. Several city officials, including the director of the Botanical Garden at that time, recognized the “great scientific and educational value” of Gasser’s private collection, and looked for possibilities to keep it intact and in Zürich. With the World Economic Crisis of 1929 casting its foreshadows, the City of Zürich was unable to purchase the collection itself, but fortunately, a thoughtful patron was found in the person of store-owner Julius Brann. For the sum of 20,000 Swiss Francs, he bought the entire collection from Gasser, and nobly donated it to the City of Zürich, with the condition that it be open to the public. At that time, Gasser’s collection consisted of 1516 individual plants of 652 species, the majority cacti. Due to the financial constraints posed by the economic crisis, the original plans to build a whole suite of display greenhouses for the plants had to be abandoned. Finally, a single simple greenhouse (Fig. 1, 2) was built for 36,000 Swiss Francs. The collection opened to the public in late 1931 at its present-day site on the shores of Lake Zürich, about 20 minutes walk from downtown Zürich and the city centre.

From the beginning, the Succulent Plant Collection became a focus of interest for both local inhabitants and visitors to Zürich, and by 1934 it had already received almost 12,500 visitors. Then as now, admission to the collection is free of charge, with the collection administered by the parks and gardens department, today called Grün Stadt Zürich, of the City council. The first curator was the Swiss horticulturalist Hans Krainz (1906 – 1980). He quickly established contact with cactus and succulent plant specialists around the world, and was thus able to acquire new plant material at a steady rate. The single display greenhouse soon proved to be too small to house the increasing diversity of plants, and within a few years, plans were developed to expand the collection. A first expansion became feasible immediately after World War II, and the present-day Giant Plant House was opened in 1948 (Fig. 3, 4). It is a testament to the popularity of the Collection that the City of Zürich was able to finance such an undertaking in a time when economic resources were scarce as a result of the war years. An additional expansion became possible in 1961, when the present-day Africa House and the entrance