

Bernard Verdcourt (1925 – 2011)

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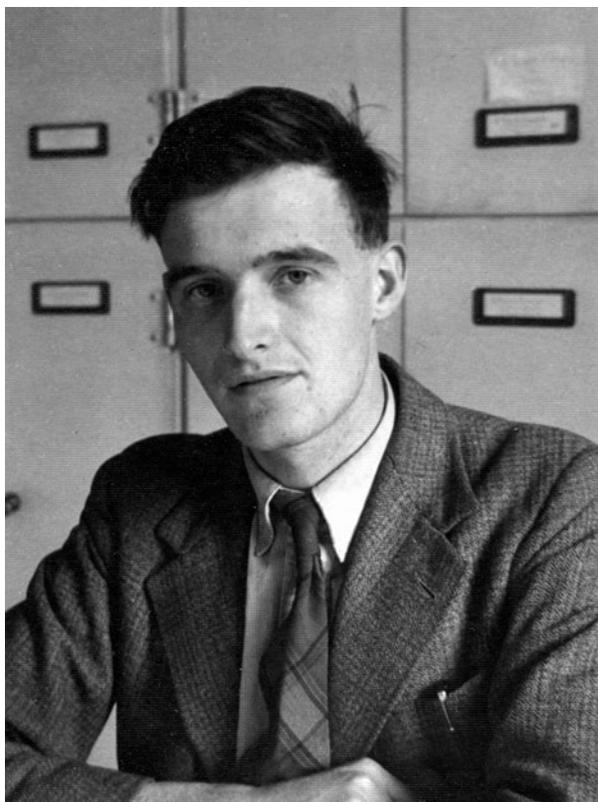


Fig. 1. Bernard Verdcourt 24th October 1949.

Bernard Verdcourt, who died on 25th October 2011, was associated with Kew from 1949 until his death — a period of over sixty years. In this time he made valuable contributions to the botany of East and southern Africa, Sri Lanka, and New Guinea, with a special interest in the families Rubiaceae, Leguminosae, Convolvulaceae and Annonaceae. He was also a world authority on the malacology of East Africa, and his wide knowledge of both plants and animals was much respected, and sought after, by his colleagues.

In a way Bernard (or BV, as he was generally known) was, to visitors, quite like the Kew Herbarium itself: initially daunting and even a bit scary, but on closer acquaintance a treasure trove of information and even

kindness and inspiration. Kew can be very grateful to him for, among other things, his enormous contribution to botany in general and the *Flora of Tropical East Africa* in particular; although in several drafts of his self-written obituary he glooms “deep down he was very aware that he had scarcely done anything of real scientific worth, just a mass of descriptive materials, useful, requiring judgement and knowledge but scarcely any intelligence”. We don’t agree, because Bernard’s prolific scientific publications enable communication about plants, and that enables *any* work on plants. So we are very grateful for all his hard work; and, then again, he was great company: crotchety, anarchic, a really wicked laugh, and a wide knowledge about almost everything (except sport, of course); and his inexhaustible store of good tales, many going back to his days at Amani and the East African Herbarium in Nairobi. His civilised coffee breaks in a hidden corner of the Kew herbarium will be remembered by many staff members and foreign visitors.

Bernard Verdcourt was born in Luton, Bedfordshire, on 20 January 1925, and went to Luton Grammar School. His love of botany was fostered by the well-known Luton amateur botanist John Dony; V. H. Chambers, the hymenopterist, who also lived locally, infused him with a growing interest in entomology. During the Second World War he was called up in 1943, and after aptitude tests went to Reading University to train as a Radar Officer; he graduated in 1945 with a degree in Radio Engineering, Physics and Chemistry, just after the war finished. He said of this period “so I had a peaceful war and have really felt guilty ever since... I thought I was doing the right thing and would be more use trained but the idea of not having done my bit has stayed with me”. He spent three years with the Printing, Packaging and Allied Trades Research Association as a microscopist, mycologist, photographer and general dogsbody to Frank Armitage. Through his contacts with John Dony and Edgar Milne-Redhead he was interviewed at the Colonial Office for two jobs: one as an entomologist with the Empire Cotton Growing Corporation in the Sudan, the other as a botanist with the East African Agriculture and Forestry Research Organisation in Tanganyika (now Tanzania). He was

offered both, and took the Tanganyika one, “chiefly because I knew a forested place was much more interesting”. He trained for a year at the Herbarium of the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, from October 1948, before taking ship to East Africa; he became P. J. Greenway’s assistant at the Amani Herbarium in Tanganyika, and said his first impression, of ... “the drive up the famous hairpins of the Amani Hill with Peter pointing out new trees every yard or so to a deafening background of cicada song always remained a vivid memory”.

Soon after, in 1950, he had to help move the famous Amani Herbarium to its new building in Nairobi, where it became the East African Herbarium; it is now part of the National Museums of Kenya. The move involved driving quarter ton trucks full of specimens down many muddy hairpin bends. The East African Herbarium had been purpose-built to incorporate the Amani and Coryndon Museum herbaria, but no provision had been made to house the staff; so Bernard took up residence at Muguga, 25 miles W of Nairobi, and did his daily commute at high speed (“goats, chickens and children scattering in all directions”), from 1958 onwards in a red TR3A sports car. Verdcourt had an intense dislike of all sports and games, much to his father’s regret; but he did take part in motor racing in East Africa, when around this time he took part in several Coronation Rallies (later the East African Safari rally) and even finished it once with Alan Rogerson — in a Peugeot 403.

From 1958 to 1964 he was Botanist-in-Charge of the East African Herbarium; his appointment was protracted, as the Director of the East African Agricultural and Forestry Research Organisation, Walter Russell, disagreed with Peter Greenway about Verdcourt succeeding Greenway; he offered the job to Jan Gillett. Gillett, in true Quaker style, told Bernard, but accepted. Nothing happened for a while, and Verdcourt became de-facto in-charge. It later turned out that Gillett was politically unacceptable to the Kenya Government. When BV rang Russell to ask who was in charge he was grudgingly told “I suppose you are”. BV perched at the end of a long bench at the front of the herbarium, with an eye on the door and an early warning system for unwelcome visitors; and with many assistants, Kirrika Kayu, George Sangai and Samwell Paulo Kibuwa among them, was always busy naming collections for various researchers and the general public, entertaining guests and overseeing the mounting and filing of specimens. This naming gave him an unrivalled knowledge of the East African flora and its literature, much called upon in later years by more specialised colleagues. Time for research and writing was, however, very limited: almost all his collecting and study was done in evenings, at week-

ends and on local leave. He gained a Ph.D. externally in 1955 (on the tribal classification of Rubiaceae), and collected over 4,000 plant specimens with many duplicates; many of these are cited in literature. He was unflagging in efforts to promote African staff held back by lack of paper qualifications. Young workers of the time, both African and European (such as Gren Lucas and Roger Polhill), retain an enormous respect and affection for his leadership and sense of important values, combined with deep kindness and concern — albeit hidden behind the facade of a colourful lifestyle. Here he got his reputation as a no-nonsense scientist, with accuracy his watchword.

He also collected East African land snails and slugs, now mostly in the National Museums of Kenya and the British Natural History Museum; this was an important field as the area had not been worked on malacologically for many years, and the only overview dated back to Von Martens, 1897. The malacological fauna is rich (perhaps 2000 species) but access to types was not easy — many were inaccessible in east Berlin. He nevertheless persisted and published a first checklist in *Achatina* (1983) and later a second edition, printed at his own cost (Verdcourt 2006). He also published a very useful series titled ‘Collectors in East Africa’ about explorers and collectors of malacofauna. Louis Leakey, the palaeontologist, encouraged him to work on fossil Kenyan molluscs, and the resulting 1963 paper with its palaeoclimatic conclusions is often quoted in works on hominid evolution. It was also at Leakey’s request that he drove a young Jane Goodall from Nairobi to Gombe Stream Reserve in West Tanzania, where she embarked on her now famous chimpanzee studies.

Verdcourt took pleasure in inviting guests who were antagonistic; on meeting Richard Meinertzhagen, the soldier, spy and naturalist, at the Nairobi Museums in 1959, he invited him to dinner — and also invited Dr (later Sir) George Taylor, then of the British Museum (Natural History) because he knew the two had fallen out over Meinertzhagen’s plant specimens. It was a memorable evening, and both Meinertzhagen and Taylor enjoyed themselves — and presumably, BV enjoyed it most of all!

In 1964 Bernard returned to England (this time Jan Gillett *did* become Botanist-in-Charge) and worked at the Kew Herbarium, first as Principal Research Fellow, and later as a Principal Scientific Officer, until his retirement in 1987. He felt his most important work during this period was his revision for the *Flora of Tropical East Africa* (FTEA) and *Flora Zambesiaca* (FZ) of the legume tribe Phaseoleae, a complex group which involved world-wide revision and major changes in generic circumscription. These were abundantly vindicated by later more sophisticated work by Maréchal and

others at Gemblox. Others felt his Rubiaceae work or his studies on Annonaceae and Convolvulaceae were at least as important.

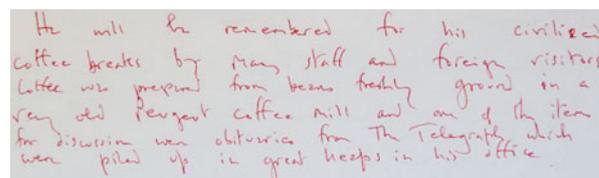
He refused promotion to the next rank, stating that others more worthy had been overlooked, and irritated authority in a number of other ways, otherwise it is very likely he would have risen higher. After his retirement he continued his work on the *Flora of Tropical East Africa*, *Flora Zambesiaca* and the *Revised Flora of Ceylon*; in his eighties he was still coming to Kew four days a week, publishing prolifically, and much sought after for opinion and identifications (when in doubt the advice was "ask BV"), and his enjoyable and rather exclusive coffee circle. In 1979 he published 44 titles, including the 645-page *Manual of the Legumes of New Guinea*; in 1996 he published 37 titles: 16 botanical, 16 zoological, two articles in the *Peugeotist*, and the others biographical. More than thirty taxa of plants, molluscs and insects are named after him, including the genera *Verdcourtia* van Mol (in molluscs) and *Verdcourtia* Wilczek (in plants); the latter, a legume genus, was reduced to synonymy soon after publication — by Verdcourt himself.

Apart from a period in the mid-1970s in which he worked on New Guinea legumes, and some contributions to the *Flora of Sri Lanka*, he was almost entirely devoted to East African botany.

Over one-fifth of the great *Flora of Tropical East Africa*, dealing with 12,500 species, was from his pen — he contributed 2582 species in 82 parts, 46 of which he wrote after his retirement. While writing this obituary we found a note by him describing the beginnings of this Flora "... started by Milne-Redhead and Turrill in an absurdly elaborate format that all but strangled the project".

He was a wonderful author from an editorial point of view: knowledgeable about the whole region and fast as a writer, plus an absolute omnivore; he would tackle any group, and produce it quickly. He was a very hard worker and extremely productive, with all his 1220 papers and books written in longhand. The Typing Pool said he had the second worst handwriting in the Herbarium, but he rightly claimed that every letter was perfectly formed, and indeed his handwriting remains remarkably uniform and easily read once the characters are learnt. He kept up a voluminous correspondence with botanists and zoologists, all of which is now archived according to his wish. For many years he was Co-recorder and then Recorder of the *Wild Fauna and Flora of the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew*.

His extensive researches on East African molluscs culminated in *A Revised List of the Non-marine Molluscs of East Africa* in 2008, as well as over 380 papers towards



He will be remembered for his civilised coffee breaks by many staff and foreign visitors. Coffee was prepared from beans freshly ground in a very old Peugeot coffee mill and one of the items for discussion was obituary from The Telegraph which was piled up in great heaps in his office.

Fig. 2. Part of one of BV's draft obituaries, in his own handwriting.

the goal of a descriptive account. He was one of the few people in the world who could name molluscs from the area, and he described over 200 new taxa (Tattersfield *et al.* 2011). His short biographies of East African mollusc collectors runs to 31 people and is very useful to botanists, too: <http://www.conchsoc.org/node/5244>. He was interested in insects and contributed over 150 notes and short papers to various entomological journals from the age of 19 onwards; he was pleased with his finds of the rare flies *Leopoldius signatus* and *Oxycera dives*. He collected *Meligethes* beetles extensively in East Africa, finding numerous new species, as well as many new species of Neuroptera. In later years he was immensely saddened by what he saw as the virtual extinction of insect diversity in Britain.

BV enjoyed controversy, and was not afraid to speak his mind, either to eminent colleagues or senior management. He once reviewed a revision by a colleague as 'abysmal', and did not suffer fools, gladly or otherwise; but was an inspiration to many younger colleagues, in Australia, East Africa and England, who admired his knowledge, his incisiveness and his clear view of what was important in systematics, as well as what was not. One of his most lasting achievements was to perceive how other people could develop talents and then taking endless pains to help them over the first barriers of preparing technical stuff and rightly asserting their confidence. The Kew Herbarium was still a bit of a male domain and he had a magical touch helping a whole stream of young women to prominence — and never lost a friend along the way.

His office (after official retirement), at the end of 'Death Row', was a remarkable place and BV seemed to be able to produce almost anything needed at an instant's notice, from coffee for ten to wine glasses for seventy, books on a wide variety of subjects, and out-of-the-way objects one might need about twice in a lifetime. It was a homely place where people, including visitors, congregated for select and civilised coffee breaks. The story is told of one party when the Keeper arrived to remonstrate gently — only to find the Director there...

Although often pedantically accurate (in his own words!) he was also prone to carelessness — one unkind commentator suggested he made mistakes in order to

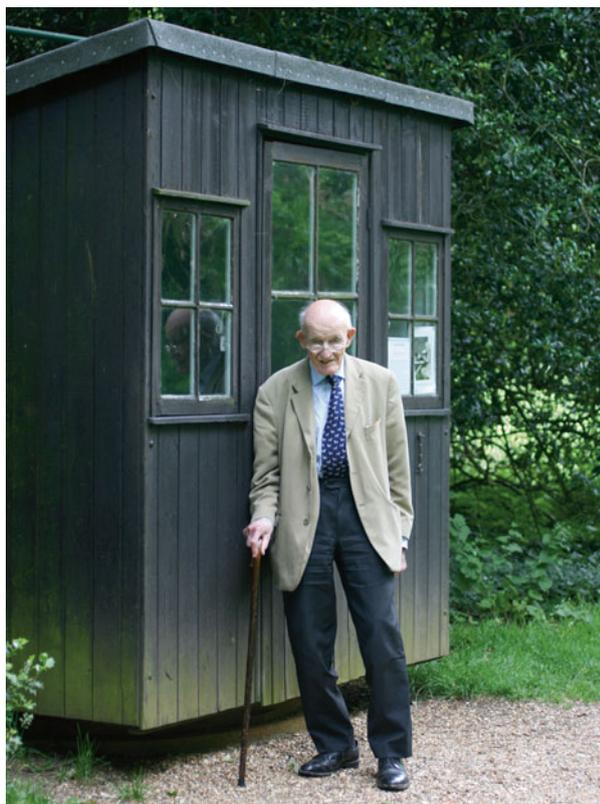


Fig. 3. BV in later years.

write yet another paper to correct them! He was a prolific author, and published, by our count, 1220 papers and books on entomology, malacology and botany, with some on Bedfordshire and the Peugeot marque. He was honoured with the Prix Léonard in 1981, and the Kew Medal in 1986 (“for his work as an outstanding taxonomic botanist and prolific author; an inspiration and friend to many of his colleagues”); he was President of the Conchological Society in 1969 – 70; in 2000 he was honoured by the Linnean Society of London with their Gold Medal and he was named a Corresponding Member of the American Society of Plant Taxonomists in 2007. Typically, he grumbled about the latter (‘they didn’t even ask me’) and was photographed glumly holding his champagne, while a crowd of beaming colleagues raise their glasses around him.

When his memory failed due to a stroke on the August Bank Holiday of 2008 he wrote a terse note to Roger Polhill that he had to stop all his work — that was it. He was quickly moved into hospital and later a care home. Later almost ninety boxes of books came out of his home study, and many out of his tiny office at work as well; most of these have been bequeathed by Bernard to various organisations.

So we will remember Bernard with gratitude for all his work, his civilised coffee breaks, his companionship and his kindness and helpfulness to many a



Fig. 4. BV’s ex libris label.

young (and not so young) botanist. He is still an inspiration to those who are trying to follow in his footsteps.

We miss him. Kazi na safari njema [good work and journey].

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- [Verdcourt, B. (1948 – 2010). Extensive notes and about seven separate (and slightly different) self-penned obituary drafts; masses of notes and many boxes of papers.]
- Verdcourt, B. (1997). *A list of publications and new taxa described (1936 – 1996) by B. Verdcourt*. Reigate Press, Maidenhead. ISBN 0 9531006 0 X.
- (2006). *A revised list of non-marine Mollusca of East Africa (Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania, excluding Lake Malawi)*. B. Verdcourt, Maidenhead.

A list of botanical publications 1997 – 2010 by B. Verdcourt

This list is to add to “A list of publications and new taxa described (1936 – 1996)” written and privately published by B. Verdcourt in 1997. The introduction starts “This list of publications and new taxa has been prepared to save someone else the trouble at a future date — having had to carry out this chore for others I know how difficult it is.” He has indeed saved us a lot of trouble — he lists 1029 publications for this period, ranging from ‘The Christmas Elf’ — a 1936 poem in *The Lutonian*, to books of hundreds of pages such as the *Manual of New Guinea Legumes* (1979), via book reviews, letters to the *Telegraph*, articles in the *Peugeotist*, Flora parts, descriptions of new species of plants, insects or molluscs... To give an indication of BV’s other interests, an example can be the year 1997 in which he published papers on lacewings, wingless female moths, butterflies and a false scorpion in his ‘in my garden’ series for the *Windsor & Maidenhead Urban Wildlife Group Newsletter*; a paper on

spiders; five contributions to the Roger Polhill Festschrift; three papers on molluscs, a paper on sheep-shearing in Bedfordshire and two other papers on Bedfordshire, plus a paper on the Peugeot marque! ... and a favourite: Verdcourt, B. (1999). The importance of corpses. *Berkshire Network for Invertebrate Conservation Newsletter* No. 2: 4...

The following list is an addition to BV's publication list mentioned above, and (yet again) based on BV's own additional (non-published) lists, plus some recent publications. It is restricted mostly to botanical papers, but includes some on East African collectors intended for malacologists — but just as useful to botanists. The list of new taxa covers the period 1997 onwards. The eponymy, however, is all-inclusive.

A full list of BV's malacological papers appeared in Tattersfield *et al.* (2011).

- Verdcourt, B. (1997). A new genus *Haplocoelopsis* (Sapindaceae) from East and central Africa. *Kew Bull.* 52: 231 – 234. [By F. G. Davies, revised and edited from her MS by B. Verdcourt].
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- Verdcourt, B. (1997). A new species of *Zehneria* (Cucurbitaceae) from Tanzania. *Kew Bull.* 52: 729 – 732, figs. 1 – 2.
- Verdcourt, B. (1997). *Pycnanthus angolensis* (Welw.) Warb. subsp. *schweinfurthii* (Warb.) Verdc. *Flora Zambesiaca* 9 (2): 38. Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, for the Flora Zambesiaca Managing Committee.
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- Verdcourt, B. (1997). A Schweinfurth type in our Economic Botany collections. *Nomenclatural Forum* 31: 219.
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- Verdcourt, B. (1998). The locality of *Gladiolus pusillus* (Iridaceae) in Tanzania — a correction. *Kew Bull.* 53: 702.
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- Verdcourt, B. (1998). New combinations in African Myricaceae. *Kew Bull.* 53: 993 – 995 (with D. J. B. Killick & R. M. Polhill).
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- List of new taxa published by Bernard Verdcourt**
- Adenodolichos huillensis* Torre var. *kawambwaensis* Verdc.
Leguminosae
- Aeschynomene pawekiae* Verdc. Leguminosae
- Allophylus delicatulus* Verdc. Sapindaceae
- Allophylus ferrugineus* Taub. var. *stipitatus* Verdc.
Sapindaceae
- Allophylus grotei* F. G. Davies & Verdc. Sapindaceae
- Athyrium rondoense* Verdc. Woodsiaceae
- Athyrium scanicinum* subsp. *newtonii* (Baker) Verdc.
Woodsiaceae
- Basananthe subsessilicarpa* J. B. Gillett ex Verdc.
Passifloraceae
- Blotiella coriacea* Verdc. Dennstaedtiaceae
- Callipteris ulugurica* Verdc. Woodsiaceae
- Cheilanthes deboeri* Verdc. Adiantaceae
- Cheilanthes hirta* Sw. var. *watmeyeri* Verdc. Adiantaceae
- Cyclosorus interruptus* H. Itô var. *striatus* (Schumach.) Verdc.
- Cyphostemma uwanda* Verdc. Vitaceae
- Deinbollia borbonica* Scheff. forma *subcordata* Verdc.
Sapindaceae
- Diplazium ulugurense* Verdc. Woodsiaceae
- Eriosema decumbens* Hauman subsp. *luxurians* Verdc.
Leguminosae
- Eriosema mariae* Verdc. Leguminosae
- Eriosema shirens* Baker f. var. *pawekiae* Verdc. Leguminosae
- Eugenia capensis* (Eckl. & Zeyh.) Sond. subsp. *multiflora*
Verdc. Myrtaceae
- Eugenia mufindiensis* Verdc. Myrtaceae
- Eugenia tanaensis* Verdc. Myrtaceae
- Eugenia thikaensis* Verdc. Myrtaceae
- Eugenia toxanatolica* Verdc. Myrtaceae
- Fadogia luangwae* Verdc. Rubiaceae
- Fadogia schmitzii* Verdc. Rubiaceae (previous description of this in 1981 was due to citation of two different specimens as holotype)
- Ficus katendei* Verdc. Moraceae
- Garcinia tanzaniensis* Verdc. Clusiaceae
- Gnidia gossweileri* (S. Moore) B. Peterson subsp. *petersiana* Verdc. Thymelaeaceae
- Gomphia densiflora* (De Wild. & T. Dur.) Verdc. Ochnaceae
- Gomphia likimiensis* (De Wild.) Verdc. Ochnaceae
- Gomphia lunzuensis* (N. Robson) Verdc. Ochnaceae
- Gomphia lutambensis* (Sleumer) Verdc. Ochnaceae
- Gomphia mildbraedii* (Gilg) Verdc. Ochnaceae
- Gomphia sacleuxii* (Tiegh.) Verdc. Ochnaceae
- Gomphia scheffleri* (Engl.) Verdc. Ochnaceae
- Gomphia scheffleri* subsp. *schusteri* (Engl.) Verdc. Ochnaceae
- Gomphia scheffleri* subsp. *taitensis* Verdc. Ochnaceae
- Huperzia dacrydiodes* (Baker) Pic. Serm. subsp. *dura*
(Pic. Serm.) Verdc. Lycopodiaceae
- Isoetes nigroreticulata* Verdc. Isoetaceae
- Kigelia africana* (Lam.) Benth. subsp. *moosa* (Sprague)
Bidgood & Verdc. Bignoniaceae
- Leptactina delagoensis* K. Schum. subsp. *grandiflora*
Verdc. Rubiaceae
- Lycopodiella caroliniana* (L.) Pic. Serm. var. *grandifolia*
(Spring) Verdc. Lycopodiaceae
- Lycopodiella caroliniana* var. *tuberosa* (Kuhn) Verdc.
Lycopodiaceae
- Morella chimanimaniana* Verdc. & Polhill. Moraceae
- Ochna apetala* Verdc. Ochnaceae
- Ochna kirkii* Oliv. subsp. *multisetosa* Verdc. Ochnaceae
- Ochna leucophloeos* A. Rich. subsp. *ugandensis* Verdc.
Ochnaceae
- Ochna polyarthra* Verdc. Ochnaceae
- Ophrestia brevibracemosa* Verdc. Leguminosae
- Ormocarpum zambesianum* Verdc. Leguminosae
- Pancovia holtzii* Radlk. subsp. *faulknerae* Verdc.
Sapindaceae
- Pellaea dura* (Willd.) Hook. subsp. *schweinfurthii*
(Hiern) Verdc. Adiantaceae
- Pellaea involuta* (Sw.) Baker var. *obscura* (N. C. Anthony) Verdc. Adiantaceae

Pellaea schippersii Verdc. Adiantaceae
Pellaea viridis (Forssk.) Prantl var. *canonica* (Kunze)
 Verdc. Adiantaceae
Pteris albersii Hieron. subsp. *mufindiensis* Verdc.
 Pteridaceae
Pteris albersii subsp. *uaraguessensis* Verdc. Pteridaceae
Pteris atrovirens f. *laevicosta* Verdc. Pteridaceae
Pteris catoptera Kunze var. *friesii* (Hieron.) Verdc. Pteridaceae
Pteris mkomaziensis Verdc. Pteridaceae
Rhynchosia chapmanii Verdc. Leguminosae
Rhynchosia chimanimaniensis Verdc. Leguminosae
Rhynchosia clivorum S. Moore subsp. *guruensis* Verdc.
 Leguminosae
Rhynchosia minima (L.) DC. var. *pedicellata* Verdc.
 Leguminosae
Rhynchosia stipitata Verdc. Leguminosae
Rhynchosia torrei Verdc. Leguminosae
Rhynchosia wildii Verdc. Leguminosae
Sida rhombifolia L. var. *afroscabrida* Verdc. Malvaceae
Sida rhombifolia var. *petherickii* Verdc. Malvaceae
Sida rhombifolia var. *serratifolia* Verdc. Malvaceae
Syzygium cordatum Krauss subsp. *shimbaense* Verdc.
 Myrtaceae
Syzygium micklethwaitii Verdc. subsp. *subcordatum* Verdc.
 Myrtaceae
Syzygium micklethwaitii Verdc. subsp. *subcordatum* Verdc.
 var. *dryas* Verdc. Myrtaceae
Tapiphyllum cistifolium (Welw. ex Hiern) Robyns var.
latifolium Verdc. Rubiaceae
Tecomaria capensis (Thunb.) Spach var. *flava* Verdc.
 Bignoniaceae

Vigna subhastata Verdc. Leguminosae
Zehneria ridens Verdc. Cucurbitaceae

Eponymous epithets

Clerodendrum verdcourtii R. Fern. (Verbenaceae)
Convolvulus verdcourtianus Sebsebe (Convolvulaceae)
Crotalaria verdcourtii Polhill (Leguminosae)
Dichaetanthera verdcourtii A. & R. Fern. (Melastomataceae)
Fadogia verdcourtii Tennant (Rubiaceae)
Heliotropium verdcourtii Craven (Boraginaceae)
Ipomoea verdcourtiana Lejoly & Lisowski (Convolvulaceae)
Lepistemon verdcourtii P. Mathew & Biju (Convolvulaceae)
Merremia verdcourtiana Lejoly & Lisowski (Convolvulaceae)
Metaporana verdcourtii Deroin (Convolvulaceae)
Neoleroya verdcourtii Cavaco (Rubiaceae)
Neonotonia verdcourtii Isely (Leguminosae)
Otiophora calycophylla (Sond.) Schltr. & K. Schum.
 subsp. *verdcourtii* Puff (Rubiaceae)
Polyalthia verdcourtii Vollesen (Annonaceae)
Psychotria verdcourtii Borhidi (Rubiaceae)
Rhynchosia verdcourtii Thulin (Leguminosae)
Rotala verdcourtii A. Fern. (Lythraceae)
Rothmannia fischeri (K. Schum.) Bullock subsp.
verdcourtii Bridson (Rubiaceae)
Sporobolus verdcourtii Napper (Gramineae/Poaceae)
Tarenna verdcourtiana Fosberg (Rubiaceae)
Thunbergia verdcourtii Vollesen (Acanthaceae)
Tricalysia verdcourtiana Robbr. (Rubiaceae)
Verdcourtia R. Wilczek (Leguminosae) = *Dipogon* Liebm.
Vigna verdcourtii Pasquet (Leguminosae)