Will Brexit lead to increased smuggling of orchids into the UK?

The Royal Horticultural Society’s (RHS) London Orchid Show, running April 8-10, is usually the highlight of the UK orchid grower’s calendar but Dr David Roberts, an orchid specialist at the University of Kent says that this year, with Brexit set to take place at the end of March it could be a very different event.

‘While the UK orchid industry has, to a certain extent, been in decline even before Brexit reared its head, everything is now up in the air, with the potential to see an increase in smuggling.

‘All orchids are currently listed in the CITES, (the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora), which means for trade to take place with the UK an export and import permit is required. With free movement within the EU, permits are not required. If we leave the EU on the March 29, this will all change.

‘The problem with orchids is that there are just so many different species, more than 27,000, as well as over 100,000 registered hybrids. Of course, not all are of horticultural value, but some are of considerable commercial importance.

‘Not only are there 27,000 species, but orchids are also then divided into about 760 different groups called genera. When Defra (the Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs) issue CITES import or export permits for plants, customers pay £67.00 per group. For those specialising in specific groups of orchids they may be able to absorb this additional cost of the permits to bring in material from the EU.

‘However, for those nurseries that grow a range of different orchid genera, the costs will certainly begin to escalate. For example, in one of the larger general orchid nurseries in the UK, you can find orchids from over 35 different genera. Even if only half of these came in from the continent, this will potentially represent a significant cost i.e. more than £1,000 in permit charges per consignment. And this is only on the UK side - if they were importing into the UK then they would also need export permits from the country of origin so this could be double.

‘With 10 days between Brexit and the start of the RHS London Orchid Show it is unclear if any nurseries will be attending from the rest of the EU and beyond. It will be easy for EU nurseries to get their stock in before Brexit, although they will have to store them somewhere before the Show.

‘But after the Show, and after Brexit, the requirement for CITES permits will have already come into force and EU traders could find their stock stuck in the UK.

‘Beyond the RHS London Orchid Show, the UK orchid growing community will be in for interesting times. The mass-produced orchids that adorn our supermarkets are unlikely to be impacted, other than the issue of travel time through Calais and Dover. As plants are brought in from the large commercial greenhouses of the Netherlands, especially in the event of a ‘no-deal’ Brexit, if they have to wait, they may not be in the top condition that supermarkets demand.

‘Within CITES there is now an exemption for certain mass-produced hybrids. It is the nurseries and growers of the more specialist orchids that will feel the impact of Brexit. The current cost of permits, and potential future increases as the government tries to claw back the full economic cost of issuing permits, are likely to mean a less diverse group of orchids coming into the UK.
‘This may benefit some nurseries due to reduced competition from the EU due to the permit barrier. However, the orchid industry is unlikely to recover to the size of its heyday in the UK because the trade will have to focus predominantly on the UK orchid growing community - most likely back garden hobby nurseries. In the future UK growers will have access to an increasingly reduced diversity of species.

‘Studies by Dr Amy Hinsley and Dr Roberts\textsuperscript{1,2} showed that rare species were in demand and that buyers bought them over the internet with little regard for CITES regulations. This will put increased pressure on the CITES team of the UK Border Force, as well as the National Wildlife Crime Unit.

‘Smuggling is likely to increase as when buyers can’t get what they want through an accessible legal source, an illegal trade will develop. It is likely collectors of palms, cacti, reptiles and amphibians with a similar trade pattern will face the same fate.’

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\textsuperscript{2}Hinsley, A., Verissimo, D., & \textbf{Roberts}, D. L. (2015). Heterogeneity in consumer preferences for orchids in international trade and the potential for the use of market research methods to study demand for wildlife. \textit{Biological Conservation}, 190, 80-86. \url{https://doi.org/10.1016/j.biocon.2015.05.010}