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Garden Tales

Herbarium a library of plants

By Lou Calabrese

Often when I mention to people that I work at a herbarium, I get a strange, blank stare. Some think it's a type of greenhouse and others think it's a place to grow herbs. Well, it's neither; and although a herbarium may contain herbs, it's not restricted to herbs. A herbarium is an indoor place where all kinds of plants are kept; however, not even one plant is alive!

It might help if one thinks of a herbarium as being a "library" or "museum," but instead of a collection of books and artifacts, a herbarium is a collection of dried, pressed, and mounted (glued) plants maintained in dust/insect-proof metal cabinets. As in a library, the herbarium also has a specific way to file the plant specimens; in our case, the plant specimens are categorized by plant family name and stored alphabetically. Herbaria can contain plants from all around the world. These plants are now in a condition to be studied for educational purposes and for research.

At Delaware State University, the Claude E. Phillips Herbarium highlights plants found on Delmarva and is named after an important Delmarva plant collector. Another unique characteristic of this herbarium is that it is open to the public. It is co-directed with the University of Delaware and has cooperative formal interaction agreements with the Adkins Arboretum, Delaware Center for Horticulture, Delaware Department of Agriculture, Delaware Department of Natural Resources & Environmental Control, Delaware Native Plant Society, Delaware Nature Society, Mt. Cuba Center for the Study of Piedmont Flora, Society of Natural History of Delaware, Natural Resources Conservation Service and Wesley College.

The herbarium is staffed by three professional botanists who have vast backgrounds in mint, sedge, and violet plants in addition to their broad knowledge of all types of plants. The "workers" (it's more like fun), are made up of volunteers and student-workers; their main "job" (fun activity) is attaching the dried/pressed plants onto herbarium paper (archival, as are all the materials used) in a very specific way as to maximize their usefulness for educational and research purposes.

Graduate students also perform herbarium tasks in addition to their studies. New volunteers are always welcome.

In addition to numerous botanical collections, an extensive botanical book library, and myriad other botanical activities, one very practical function is to identify plants for members of the public; many times such requests come through the Cooperative Extension office on campus. This free service to private individuals is a handy way for gardeners to find out what's growing in their back yards (in some cases, there may be a charge e.g., for commercial organizations).

There are two educational features on DSU's campus quite popular with both the young and adults. The pleasant Woodland Trail through the College Woods is used to educate elementary school children, botanical groups, and interested adults. The Campus Tree Walk, which includes more than 80 different trees and shrubs, is a delightful and educational traispe through the attractive DSU campus. Informative brochures for both programs are free and available by contacting Dr. Yost at the number below. Dr. Yost also conducts monthly botanical tours on campus, highlighting seasonal and fundamental botanical topics.

Editor's note: On the campus of Delaware State University, the Claude E. Phillips Herbarium is Delaware's center for research, education, and outreach about plant identification, locations, and uses. Call Dr. Susan Yost at 857-6452 to arrange a tour of the Herbarium and for additional information about this article.