

What is a herbarium?

A **herbarium** is a place or institution containing a collection of dried plants that are mounted, labeled, and systematically arranged for use in scientific study. Basically, a herbarium is a library of dead (but still immensely useful) plants.

The earliest herbaria were founded in Europe in the early 1600's, during the days of exploration. So many plant specimens were being collected by world explorers that botanical gardens were unable to maintain live specimens of all species.

Herbariums of all sizes exist today. The largest herbaria are: Kew Gardens in London with about 7 million specimens, New York Botanical Gardens with approximately 5.6 million, and the Missouri Botanical Gardens in St. Louis with about 5.2 million specimens. Herbaria sometimes grow large as a result of other collections being folded in as they are discontinued (herbaria mergers) or as personal collections are donated.

The UT herbarium has approximately 1.1 million specimens – it is the largest herbarium in the southwestern United States and ranks fifth among U.S. university herbaria and twelfth across the nation. The UT Herbarium (also called the Plant Resources Center) is especially strong in plants from the southwest United States and Mexico and houses one of the largest collections of Asteraceae family specimens (over 200,000 sheets). Presently the number of vascular plant collections inserted in the herbarium is growing at an approximate rate of 16,400 specimens per year.

Plants are collected from all over the world in all ecosystem types in an effort to document the diversity and distribution of the world's flora. Specimens are mounted on acid-free paper and labeled with information such as the plant's scientific name, the collection site (more recently including GPS info), date, and name of the collector. Herbaria differ in how their specimens are catalogued, usually either by evolutionary relationship or alphabetically (UT uses both, at different taxon levels).

Plant specimens are used by scientists for plant identification and study. They are also used as a historical record, by conservationists, as teaching tools, and sometimes by amateur botanists from the general public.

As we lose natural habitats around the world, herbaria increasingly serve as a record of the recent history of plant life and as a repository of precious genetic information.

February 2, 2005