



## A New Era for the University Herbarium

The University Herbarium, initiated by Darwin's mentor Professor John Henslow, is a treasure trove of pressed and dried plants spanning three centuries. Originally created for the study of plant taxonomy – the naming and classification of plants – in the past twenty years herbaria have undergone a revival as their specimens have been recognised as a valuable source of genetic material.

Cambridge's Herbarium is one of the nation's most comprehensive and definitive working collections of plants, including species that are now extinct. It is unique in holding:

- 50,000 type-specimens, which act as the universal references for classifying and naming plants and so underpin all diversity and conservation studies;
- the most comprehensive representation of the whole flora of Great Britain, both native and introduced, over 300 years of study;
- about 2,400 plants collected by Charles Darwin on the voyage of *HMS Beagle* (1831-1836).

In recognition of its enduring importance to the world, in 2012 the University Herbarium was relocated to a purpose-built facility in the state-of-the-art new Sainsbury Laboratory, Cambridge, which recently opened in the University's Botanic Garden. The specialist environment created for the Herbarium

is designed to meet the stringent criteria required to maintain the integrity of this priceless collection.

Following its relocation, digital cataloguing of the Herbarium's 1.1 million plant specimens is now underway. This process, which has only recently begun at herbaria across the world, will make this extraordinary collection accessible to a global audience.

Plant specimens, in conjunction with their accompanying field notes, hold fascinating, often unique information that can shed new light on plant evolution and, through analysis of their DNA, help to rediscover lost plant genes that may code for valuable attributes. They can inform studies of contemporary issues, from the effects of climate change and the spread of invasive 'alien' plants, to the measurement of biodiversity changes over time.

Some specimens provide a tantalising new insight into the ways local cultures, such as those in the Torres Straits and Papua New Guinea, used their indigenous plants as medicines, in hunting, and even as love potions. Such traditional knowledge, holding the promise of future products and therapies, may otherwise have disappeared forever along with the loss of local languages.

**The University seeks support to build a team of specialist herbarium staff to continue digitisation of the herbarium collection, and use it to conduct research that will unlock new secrets about the plant kingdom.**

The following funding would support permanent posts to expand the team at the Herbarium:

- Senior Assistant Curator: £2 million
- Assistant Curator: £1.6 million
- Herbarium Technician: £1.2 million

The University would be delighted to discuss naming opportunities in recognition of a major gift.

For more information about this initiative, please contact Professor David Baulcombe, Department of Plant Sciences, email [dcb40@cam.ac.uk](mailto:dcb40@cam.ac.uk), tel 01223 333958, or see <http://cambridgeherbarium.org>

A short film about the Herbarium is available at:

[www.cam.ac.uk/research/news/new-secrets-of-the-plant-kingdom-uncovered-after-centuries-in-storage](http://www.cam.ac.uk/research/news/new-secrets-of-the-plant-kingdom-uncovered-after-centuries-in-storage)

To discuss your support of the initiative, please contact

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