



PLANTS PEOPLE
POSSIBILITIES

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From the Field to the Herbarium, Library, Art and Archives - Journey of a Plant Specimen

When a specimen is brought to the Herbarium, Library, Art and Archives for storage, it joins some eight million others – of plants and fungi. These specimens help botanists in their quest to document, describe and understand the world's plant and fungal diversity, so that we can understand the composition of the vegetation of different environments and work with partners towards finding ways of conserving them. Kew's Herbarium collections are regularly consulted by Kew's botanists, as well as visitors from all over the world, as part of this vital work.

But how does a specimen get from its place in the field to Kew? Below is a concise guide to its journey:

1. The plant or fungus, or a part of it, is collected in the field. It is given a collection number
2. It is dried in the field, using two vital pieces of equipment in the collection process – a plant press and a drier. In humid environments, specimens dry slowly, often becoming mouldy, so this must be done as soon as possible. Specimens are often packaged in local newspaper
3. Once the appropriate permits have been granted, the specimen is then transferred to Kew's Herbarium with at least one duplicate specimen left in the country of origin. Due to the great diversity of plants, it is often hard to know in the field which species has been found, so specimens must be transported to the Herbarium in order to compare them to those in the reference collection. The correct names are then transmitted to the collections and country of origin
4. It is placed in a freezer for three days at -35 degrees C. All specimens must be frozen to ensure pests are not brought into the Herbarium
5. The specimen is then identified to genus and species level, by a family specialist using literature (such as the many 'Floras', books or other works describing and identifying a country's plants or fungus, many produced by Kew and its partners) or named specimens housed in the Herbarium
6. Once the specimen is identified, it is mounted on to acid-free archival-quality paper, ready for storage
7. Carefully stored in its folder, the specimen is now a usable herbarium sheet and can remain in good condition for at least 400 years
8. The specimens are studied accessed by botanists and visitors from around the globe, particularly as many of them are being digitised and made available on the internet

Ends

For more information please contact the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew press office on +44 (0)20 8332 5607 or email pr@kew.org

Notes to editors

- What is a Herbarium?

A herbarium (plural: herbaria) is a collection of preserved plant and fungal specimens, used as reference material, to document the identity of plants and fungi. Some specimens are 'types' – the original specimens on which new species descriptions have been based and a key reference point for the application of scientific names. Specimens will usually be in a dried form, mounted on a sheet, but depending upon the material may also be kept in boxes (eg bulky plant parts such as palm fronds) or in alcohol (see Kew's spirit collection <http://www.kew.org/collections/spiritcol.html>)