

Historic plant type specimens to go digital

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A unique collection of plant specimens that is part of The Academy of Natural Sciences' world-renowned herbarium soon will be viewable through the Internet, thanks to a grant from the National Science Foundation.

The three-year, \$262,500 grant will be used to produce high-resolution images of some 30,000 "type" specimens, some dating back to the 18th century. The images then will be posted on the World Wide Web along with detailed records that describe where each plant was collected and by whom.

"This greatly facilitates the work of researchers who lack access to a large research herbarium and to research-quality libraries, especially those in developing countries," said Academy Botany Curator Dr. Lucinda McDade.

Founded in 1812, The Academy of Natural Sciences was the natural repository for these plants as well as for other plants, insects, fossils, mammals, fish and birds that were collected by early explorers such as Meriwether Lewis and William Clark. Today the herbarium houses more than 1.3 million plants from around the world, including some of the oldest plant specimens in North America, and continues to grow with new additions of both type and general plant specimens. The collection serves as a key resource for plant scientists, students and historians.

"The Academy is the oldest continuously operating natural history museum in the Americas and holds the definitive collection of

specimens for early North American botany," McDade said. "These specimens are key to understanding how scientific names have been applied to plants over more than 200 years of research by plant scientists. And the collection continues to expand."

Because of the historic depth and breadth of the holdings, the types collection is large, diverse and unique. Early collectors often did not preserve more than one sample of a plant as collectors do nowadays, so many of the specimens cannot be found anywhere other than at the Academy.

Source: The Academy of Natural Sciences

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