

Botanists unearth old headlines while unwrapping plant samples

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Students unwrapping plant samples got a bit of history mixed in with botany recently, when they unearthed headlines from old newspapers dating as far back as 1950.

While sorting a donated collection of plant cuttings as part of their summer jobs, students working in the Faculty of Agricultural, Life and Environmental Sciences were entertained by headlines in the old newsprint in which the samples were swathed.

The yellowed newspaper pages date back to the 1950s and 1970s, and before they were used to wrap plant cuttings, were torn from the Edmonton Journal, the Ohio-based Wheeling News-Register, the Patriot Ledger of Massachusetts, and the Athenaeum, the campus newspaper of West Virginia University.

Headlines ranged from military drafts for the Korean War in 1950 to stories in the 1970s about harmful wash-day [phosphates](#) in the water and articles about U.S. president Richard Nixon's policies on the Vietnam War.

“The one that stood out was the Nixon one. It was about his campaign. I found it a little funny because it was way back in the day,” said Shaun Kulbaba, a fourth-year student of conservation biology.

Kulbaba and his fellow students were also struck by the idea of viewing plants collected decades ago. The cuttings of assorted lilies, marsh

marigolds, bluebells and wetland plants were in good condition, considering their age.

“A lot of the stuff we collect doesn’t last as long as that. They were in very good shape,” Kulbaba said.

“It was really neat to think that we were doing the exact same thing as someone more than 50 years ago,” added Tyana Rudolfsen, a third-year biological sciences student.

The collection, donated by Bob Longworth, assistant chair in the U of A Department of Renewable Resources, is unusual for its vintage. He had it stored in his home, having collected much of it while working as a summer student “circa 1980” and through inheriting older specimens, and thought it was time to share it.

“Rather than having them sitting in my basement and getting older, I thought some of the samples could be useful for hands-on learning,” Longworth said.

In fact, the samples, which were predominantly gathered in Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba, will be used in a first-year plant identification class this fall, which pleases Longworth, who remembers being awed by his own long-ago experience as a budding field researcher.

“Some of the plants were gorgeous finds; they are real gems. It is satisfying to have the samples I collected be of use to students in our faculty decades later.”

Viewing plants that are up to 50 years old is an unusual change-up for first-year classes, Longworth noted.

“It is very unusual to have a teaching collection to share that is anywhere near this old. Generally samples are renewed frequently. This is a teaching collection, so it’s meant to be handled. Students use it weekly in labs and inevitably the samples wear out and need replacement.”

Since some of the newspapers used to wrap the samples were before his time, Longworth believes they came from other sources, such as government agencies passing along surplus samples.

Though their source remains a mystery, the headlines and ads were a little brightener to the lab work of unwrapping piles of plants, said Diana Young, a fourth-year land reclamation student.

“I’m not going to change my major to history or anything, but it was nice to get a bit of history into a regular day,” she chuckled.

Provided by University of Alberta

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