



Photo by Derrel Hewitt

Herbarium curator and director David Wagner spends much of his time caring for the University's collection of rare plants.

## University's herbarium is home to thousands of plant specimens

By Joseph Menzel

Of the Emerald

One University library on campus allows its patrons to borrow material for years at a time. They can even withdraw more than 1,000 items at one time.

Actually, this library isn't a library at all but a repository where any number of several thousand plants can be retrieved.

This pseudo-library is the University's herbarium, located just south of University Museum of Natural History near the science library.

Herbarium Director and Curator David Wagner's position is so involved and time-consuming, he could easily hire three people just to perform his responsibilities, he says.

Still, Wagner is solely responsible for maintaining what amounts to a room-sized filing cabinet full of flowering plants, ferns, moss and other plant life native to Oregon and the United States.

The herbarium loans a significant portion of its specimens to institutions around the country. During any given week, as many as 2,000 to 3,000 specimens may be on loan.

What makes the herbarium valuable to botanists and other

scientists is its ability to provide specimens of plants, both common and rare, that will enable botanists to make positive identifications of specimens they have in their possession.

"What makes a specimen valuable is not its rarity, but where it fits into our knowledge of plants," Wagner says. "Often, it's difficult to identify plants simply by reading descriptions. A name of a plant is not a verbal description, so original collections are really valuable."

The herbarium holds the collections of Oregon's pioneer botanists. The collection includes the plants of Thomas Jefferson Howell, who explored the corners of the state in the mid-1850s looking for specimens. Unfortunately, some of Howell's specimens have deteriorated, leaving nothing more than twigs.

In 1903, Howell gave the University his collection, which initiated the creation of the University's herbarium that remains today. The herbarium has grown significantly since Howell made his original contribution.

"We have about 1,100 primary specimens, 200 of which are absolutely irreplaceable," Wagner said. The

herbarium has specimens from throughout the country, but its focus is on regional material.

"We have just about every flowering plant in Oregon. The herbarium itself is a museum used to maintain permanent records of Oregon," Wagner said.

The herbarium is now housed in what was once the physical plant's plumbing shop. As a result, the room has no environmental controls, no filtering system and no temperature controls to maintain the condition of the specimens. Still, the plants have been kept virtually intact in their metal cabinets.

"For an irreplaceable collection housed in a concrete garage, we've been lucky," Wagner said.

Wagner said he looks forward to spring when the herbarium will be relocated at the Bio-Social building located across Franklin Boulevard. Animals used for scientific experiments once were housed there, so the facility is equipped with environmental controls.

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