

HGWJ Schweickerd Herbarium turns 85



H G W J SCHWEICKERDT-HERBARIUM

A bronze plaque in honour of Prof HGWJ Schweickerd, one of South Africa's best-known plant scientists

The word herbarium is often associated with a collection of herbs or even a herb garden, while in fact it has nothing to do with herbs – apart from perhaps containing a few dried specimens. A herbarium can be described as a library or repository where dried plant specimens are kept. The main purpose of a herbarium is to serve as a reference, information and research resource and it is often referred to as a scientific storehouse of botanical information.

The herbarium at UP was founded in 1925 by Prof CEB Bremekamp. It expanded rapidly following the appointment of well-known botanist Prof Hans Schweickerd in the 1930s.

The herbarium is currently one of the ten largest in Southern Africa and the third largest at a Southern African University.

More than 110 000 specimens have been collected since and it is estimated that the value of UP's collection is in excess of R3 million. This is besides the fact that all specimens are in a sense

irreplaceable, being unique archival records of a particular plant at a specific locality, at a particular point in time. Many localities have since been destroyed by development.

The herbarium is currently one of the ten largest in Southern Africa and the third largest at a Southern African University. The largest collection of liquid-preserved plant material in sub-Saharan Africa is housed at UP's herbarium. Prof Braam van Wyk, well-known tree expert, author and researcher, has been the curator of the herbarium since 1977.

Apart from the one at UP, there are only two other large herbaria in Gauteng, namely the National Herbarium, based at the South African National Biodiversity Institute in Silverton, and the CE Moss Herbarium at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg.

The majority of specimens at UP's herbarium are indigenous. Only a few aliens are on file, but specimens are restricted to those naturalised as invader weeds in South Africa and garden plants collected mainly on the UP campuses. As far as



Ms Elsa van Wyk, a technical assistant at the HGWJ Schweickerdt Herbarium, with a dried plant sample from the collection.

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Specimens

According to Ms Elsa van Wyk, technical assistant, each specimen, following its collection, is carefully packed in a plant press and dried in an oven. It is then mounted on cardboard, labelled and filed in a special folder.

Details, which include the classification, genus, species, Latin and popular names, where, when and by whom it was collected and a description, are included. The information is also captured in a database. Valuable specimens, on which new plant names are based, are scanned and the images saved in an international electronic database.

In the past, specimens were treated with poison, but due to potential health risks, other measures have been introduced to keep insects at bay.

Collections

Apart from material collected by students, researchers, collaborators and other botanical enthusiasts, international and local botanical gardens and herbaria also exchange specimens if they have duplicates. The UP herbarium comprises two sections; namely the main collection and the public collection.

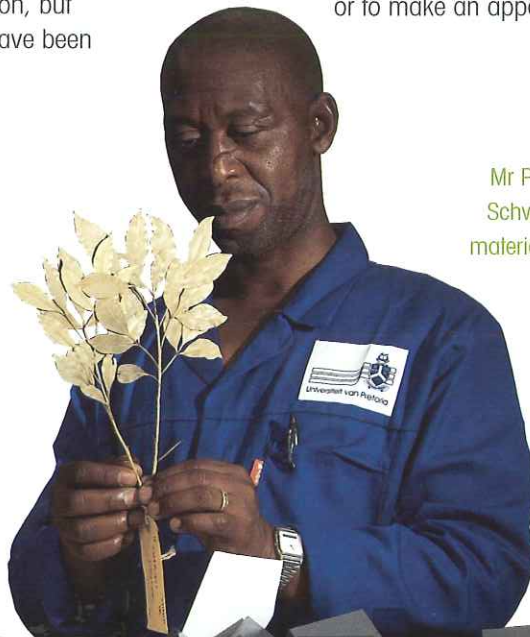
The main collection is used mostly by postgraduate students and researchers,

but also by nature conservation agencies, environmental non-governmental organisations and environmental impact assessment consultants.

The public collection is used by undergraduate students and members of the public. Students use the collection as part of their studies in botany and other biological fields, while members of the public use the herbarium to identify plants that they come across in either gardens or during their travels.

A library with a good collection of field guides, scientific books, dictionaries and geographical maps form part of the herbarium.

Members of the public who are interested in making use of this service can contact either Ms Nel on 012 420 4044 or Ms Van Wyk on 012 420 4784 for more information or to make an appointment.



Mr Petrus Rantho, an assistant at the HGWJ Schweickerdt Herbarium, mounts dried plant material on cardboard before it is labelled and filed in a special folder.