Herbarium at-a-glance.

• The Brown University Herbarium houses more than 100,000 vascular plants, fungi, mosses, and algae from New England and around the world.

• The collection includes historically important specimens from 19th- and early-20th-century expeditions, including rare and extinct species.

• Historical specimens assist scientific studies of climate change, invasive species, evolution, genetics, and extinction.

• Established in 1869, the Herbarium moved to its new, modern facility in Brown’s BioMedical Center in 2012.

• The 1,600-square-foot space encompasses climate-controlled collection storage, a prep room, digital equipment, and a botanical library.

• The Brown University Herbarium is open to the entire scientific community and to the public.

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“...every courtesy will be extended to visiting botanists.”

(Botanical Gazette, 1880, 5(12):149-150)
Brown acquired its first botanical specimens in 1869 with the herbarium and library of the Providence botanist Stephen T. Olney. Late-19th-century acquisitions, such as the private collections of renowned botanists and rare, historically significant specimen sets, substantially enhanced the Herbarium’s size and scientific value. The collection was moved several times to various buildings on campus before taking root in its current, modern home in the BioMed Center in 2012.

An herbarium is a collection of dried and pressed plants, fungi, and algae, mounted on archival-quality paper. Specimens preserved in this way can last for centuries.

The Brown University Herbarium, built over many years by botanists working close to home and in far-flung places, provides historical information that enables scientists to better understand the present and prepare for the future. Researchers can visit, explore, study, and add to the collection, enhancing scientific collaboration and knowledge.

The collection offers a priceless snapshot of botanical life, in Rhode Island and across the nation and the world, in the 19th and early 20th centuries. It serves as an important resource to the scientific community for studies of climate change, genetics, evolution, conservation, and biodiversity.

The Herbarium is part of a regional effort to digitize all specimens from herbaria across New England. Brown undergraduates are involved in the effort to photograph and catalog our North American specimens and make them available online. Students and faculty are also focused on adding to the collections through ongoing fieldwork.

As an educational facility for researchers, amateur botanists, and the public, the Herbarium plays a key role in Brown’s overall mission “to discover, communicate, and preserve knowledge at ever higher levels of distinction.”

A rich history of preservation.

The Herbarium’s stewards: world-class plant biology researchers.

Erika Edwards, PhD (right), associate professor of ecology and evolutionary biology, became director of the Brown University Herbarium in 2008. An evolutionary biologist who focuses on plants from arid environments, Edwards earned her doctorate at Yale and joined Brown’s faculty in 2007. She has published widely and has received more than $2.5 million in grant funding for her work on the evolution and systematics of flowering plants.

The Herbarium collections manager, Tim Whitfield, PhD (left), assistant professor of ecology and evolutionary biology (research), studies patterns of plant diversity and species coexistence. He earned his doctorate at the University of Minnesota and joined the faculty at Brown in 2013.