In the Herbarium: The Hidden World of Collecting and Preserving Plants


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I recently finished In the Herbarium: The Hidden World of Collecting and Preserving Plants by Maura C. Flannery. As someone who has a very limited knowledge of the history of botany, I wanted to learn more about how and why plants were collected and preserved historically. Flannery, professor emerita of biology at St. John's University, traces the history of plant collecting from 1540s Italy to present-day California.

The book explores the practice and process of herbaria, a repository of preserved plants. From metadata to digitization to digital archives, Flannery carefully describes the complex history of collection maintenance, preservation, and access to plants, especially the discoveries of new plant species, in layman's terms. Archivists will be particularly interested in her description of large-scale digitization efforts happening around the world and the challenges in ensuring digital object metadata is standardized and useful for researchers. Naming conventions for plants are often complex and therefore make searching difficult. For example, the Venus flytrap may be represented in a catalog by its scientific name, Dionaea. In this case, if a user searches the plant by its common name, they will not get a complete return with all pertinent catalog holdings. In addition, Flannery points out a prevalent yet critical issue that is relevant to all archives and repositories: many databases are adhering to their own practices, and the lack of interoperability among data bases can also complicate the discovery process for researchers looking for specific plant images or digital objects.

Throughout the book, Flannery also uses historical vignettes to describe plant collector and curators’ habits, interactions, and behaviors and the threats that deforestation and climate crises present to their work. She includes scientific illustrations of plants that highlight their economic and cultural significance in society. Flannery emphasizes how herbarium collections are preserved and studied by Indigenous groups to document Indigenous knowledge connected to the plants.

In the Herbarium illuminates the role of herbaria and its cultural significance. Studying herbaria enables one to understand the interdisciplinary and intercultural connections between language, library and archival sciences, art history, anthropology, history, agriculture, and ecology. Readers interested in the history of botany, herbaria, life science
taxonomy, and digitization processes will find this book fascinating in understanding how collecting plants reveals our past, present, and future.