Plant Collections

The living collection of the U.S. Botanic Garden is the foundation of the institution. Promoting botanical knowledge is an important part of the Garden's mission. Maintaining an ordered, documented, labeled collection of living plants is essential to that end.

Keeping track of so many plants is a challenge, but an extensive database is necessary for cultivation, conservation and research. When acquired, each plant is documented and tagged with its scientific name, common name, description, range, source and physical location in the collection. The information is used to retrieve plants for display, follow plant propagation history and maintain documentation on rare and endangered plant populations.

Summary of the Collection

The U.S. Botanic Garden maintains more than 12,000 accessions, which equates to about 65,000 plants. These are used for exhibition, study and exchange with other institutions. The Garden's noteworthy collections include economic plants, medicinal plants, orchids, carnivorous plants, cacti and succulents, bromeliads, cycads and ferns. Historic specimens include several that date from the original 1842 founding collection.

The Garden also serves as a rescue center for plants confiscated at U.S. borders in cooperation with CITES, the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora.

While individual plants are the building blocks of exhibits, the plant collection as a whole reflects our institutional history, supports programmatic goals and helps shape the future.

Search the Collection

Our living collections database is available online through BG-BASE, which is software developed at the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh. Questions about our holdings or inquiries about a specific taxon should be addressed to botanist Kyle Wallick.

How to Read a Plant Label

Throughout the U.S. Botanic Garden, plants are labeled to help visitors recognize and remember them. Most plants have at least one common name, given in English, but their botanical names are usually in Latin. Labels are designed so that the essential information about a plant is presented consistently:

- The first line is usually the common name.
- The second line is the botanical name, which is italicized.
    - First word indicates the genus;
    - Second word is the species;
    - If there is a third word, this is usually a subspecies or variety;
    - A word preceded by an "x" or enclosed quotation marks indicates a cultivated variety.
- The third line indicates the plant family.
- The fourth line is its place of origin. Cultivated varieties do not show a place of origin because they do not appear in the wild.