



Plant Collections

The living collection of the U.S. Botanic Garden is the foundation of the institution. Maintaining an ordered, documented, labeled collection of living plants is the Garden's mission of promoting botanical knowledge.

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 tagged with its scientific names, common names, description, native range, original source, and physical location in the collection. The information is used to 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. The Garden's noteworthy collections include economic plants, medicinal plants, orchids, carnivorous plants, cacti and other succulents, bromeliads, cycads. Some specimens include several that date from the original 1842 founding of the collection.

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

While individual plants are the building blocks of exhibits, the plant collection as a whole reflects our institutional history and priorities, and supports programs.

Search the Collection

Our living collections database is available online through BG-BASE, which is software originally developed at the Arnold Arboretum. Questions about our database or 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 learn about them. Most plants have at least one common name in English. The botanical name is in Latin and is the most prominent feature on the label. Labels are designed so that the essential information about a plant is consistently.

1. The first line, at the top of the label, has the plant family name, and sometimes the plant's conservation status or ranking based upon information from the IUCN (International Union for Conservation of Nature) and NatureServe.
2. The second line is the italicized botanical name. The first word is the genus and the second word is the specific epithet - together they form the species name. If there is a third word that indicates a subspecies (subsp. or ssp.) or variety (var.) of the species.
3. The third line usually gives one or more common names, but may instead have a cultivar (cultivated variety) name. Cultivars are plants that were bred for one or more desirable characteristics (e.g., variegated leaves, tasty fruit, larger seed set). If the plant is a cultivar, then the common name is listed.
4. The last line usually indicates the native range of the species. This is generally omitted for cultivars as they do not typically appear in the wild.