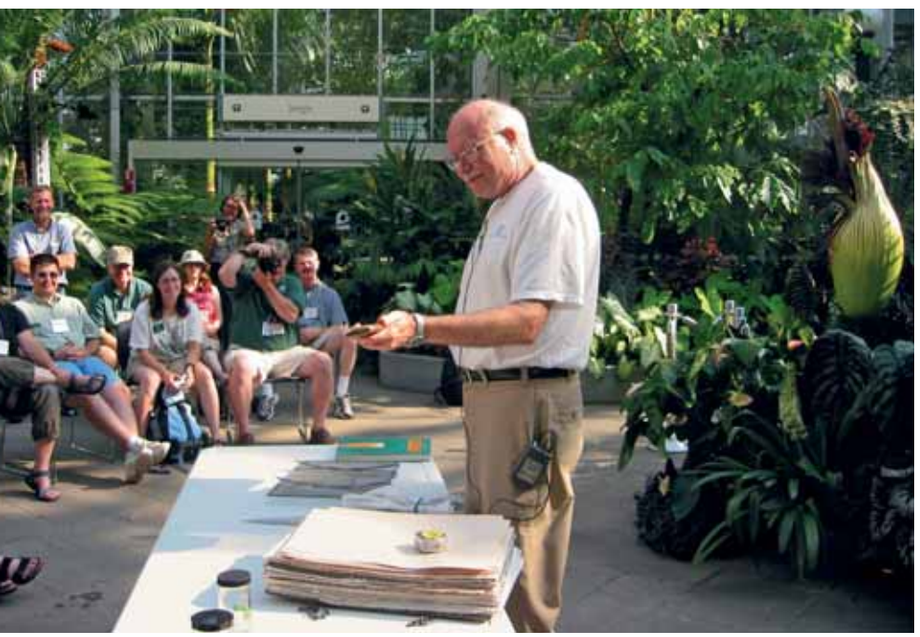
The U.S. Botanic Garden and the Smithsonian



(above)
Dissection of the titan arum (*Amorphophallus titanum*).
Smithsonian botanist Dr. Dan Nicolson prepares to dissect the Botanic Garden's titan arum in front of a group of visiting science teachers. The dissected and pressed plant was preserved at the Smithsonian as a herbarium specimen.

(left)
Ginger (*Smithatris myanmarensis*).
Smithsonian scientists launch expeditions to remote areas of the globe, where they continue to discover new species of plants, such as this ginger identified by Dr. John Kress in Myanmar. These rare plants are cultivated at the Botanic Garden Production Facility and put on display in the Conservatory.

Throughout its travels, the U.S. Exploring Expedition of 1838–1842 sent tons of collected material to Washington whenever its ships met other ships in port. By the end of the voyage, these amazing collections of natural specimens—birds, animals, insects, fossils, minerals, shells, and marine life, along with seeds, nuts, and living and dried plants—were housed at the U.S. Patent Office. The monumental task of preserving the materials required government support, and a good deal of lobbying took place to get the funding for cataloging and publication of the discoveries. Through the hard work of a group of Washington citizens and a generous bequest from James Smithson, a little-known British citizen, the expedition's bounty became the core natural history collection of the Smithsonian Institution, established by Congress in 1846.

The plant materials from the expedition were divided: preserved plant specimens (called herbarium specimens) and botanical art went to the Smithsonian; live plants and propagation specimens went to the Botanic Garden. In the years since, these two independent institutions have benefited and complemented one another. Today a formal relationship recognizes the common origins and unifies the strengths of both entities. The Department of Botany at the National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution, is an international research and education center in the botanical sciences, specializing in plant taxonomy and classification. It also has become an international center for plant biodiversity studies and conservation. The U.S. Botanic Garden is a major botanical exhibition center that displays the biodiversity of world plants to more than 750,000 visitors each year. It also oversees a twenty-five-acre production nursery facility where live plants can be cultivated and studied. The Botanic Garden is able to educate visitors about the Smithsonian's botanical work and plant collections by highlighting the actual plants that result from the exploration and conservation efforts of Smithsonian scientists. Together these institutions are developing a number of programs for research and exhibitions.

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