

The U.S. National Herbarium

THE botanists on the U.S. Exploring Expedition could not bring back live specimens of every new plant they encountered. Only 250 live plants survived the grueling four-year voyage. Instead they preserved plants by cutting, drying, and pressing the essential parts of each one. These plant materials are called herbarium specimens, and they are used by botanists to identify and classify different plant groups. The expedition's botanists pressed approximately 50,000 specimens representing 10,000 species, and those herbarium sheets formed the inaugural collections of the U.S. National Herbarium at the Smithsonian Institution. The Herbarium now contains 4.8 million preserved plant specimens from around the globe. More than 100,000 of these are "types," the original specimens of the plants whose scientific descriptions are the basis for naming new species.



(ABOVE)
THE U.S. NATIONAL HERBARIUM.
U.S. NATIONAL HERBARIUM,
SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION

(ABOVE RIGHT)
HERBARIUM PRESS PRESERVES
PARTS OF THE TITAN ARUM.

(RIGHT)
ILIAU (*Wilkesia gymnoxiphium*).
U.S. NATIONAL HERBARIUM,
SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION
The original herbarium specimen
of *Wilkesia* was discovered on the
Hawaiian island of Kaua'i during the
U.S. Exploring Expedition of 1838–1842.

