

UNM Herbarium Senior Collections Manager Hired

By Maya L. Kapoor

Not just anyone can go from seeking out the rarest of New Mexico plants to managing a collection of almost all documented plant species in the state. Phil Tonne, rare plant botanist at Natural Heritage New Mexico for the past ten years, is in the process of making that leap.



Phil Tonne, senior collections manager at the UNM herbarium, examines an herbarium specimen. Photo by Maya L. Kapoor.

As of April 1, Tonne is Senior Collections Manager at the University of New Mexico Herbarium. In his new role, Tonne will act as the herbarium's liaison to the public and the science community. "I will make sure people who need access [to the herbarium] and support get it, especially people who need help accessing the collection," Tonne clarified recently. A big part of his duties will be constantly improving the geographic component of the information stored by the herbarium. "We need to fill in gaps in our collection," Tonne explained. "For example, there are counties where we don't have common species [collected]."

Pages of Plants

Simply put, an herbarium is a collection of actual specimens of the plant species in a particular location. In the case of the UNM herbarium, that region is New Mexico and surrounding states. Plant specimens are carefully identified, pressed, glued to durable sheets of paper, and stacked horizontally in cabinets. Specimens are arranged alphabetically by family, then genus, then species. About 90,000 of the approximately 118,000 specimens in the UNM herbarium are from New Mexico.

Herbarium collections are a reference to which you can compare a mystery plant as you work to identify it, but that's only the beginning. Tonne explains, "The Museum [of Southwestern Biology] in general, and the herbarium collection, are very important to understanding the natural world and our tie to that – who we are, what our role is on the planet. The herbarium represents the diversity, and sometimes abundance and distribution, of different plants." In fact, Tonne explains, the herbarium provides the "science behind our botanical understanding of the state. We get collections from all over the state for thousands of species, and we preserve them for hundreds of years for use in studies – ecological, botanic, taxonomic."

Everyone's Herbarium

Think the herbarium is solely the territory of professional botanists? Think again. According to Tonne, "there's room for people of all walks of life to contribute to the botany and flora of New Mexico. We live in the fifth largest state and many parts are undercollected. To me, that's exciting – we still have a lot to do and learn. There's something new around every corner and people can help us with that."

A great place to learn more about the University of New Mexico Herbarium is at its website, <http://www.msb.unm.edu/herbarium/>.

If there is a particular plant or group of plants you'd like to see in person, The website of the New Mexico Biodiversity Collections Consortium is the place to go: <http://nmbiodiversity.org/>. This website allows you to do a search of all accessioned plant specimens in the state of New Mexico – which means those that Tonne manages at UNM, but also those located in herbaria at New Mexico State University, Eastern New Mexico University, and the Gila Center for Natural History.

If you would like to see plant specimens in the UNM herbarium, or speak to Tonne about donating plants you collected, you can set up an appointment to do so as described on the herbarium website.

Note: Phil Tonne will be presenting a talk, "Rare Plant Recovery Efforts in New Mexico," at the October 5, 2011 meeting of the Albuquerque chapter of the NPSNM.

Maya L. Kapoor is the editor of the newsletter of the Albuquerque chapter of NPSNM.

