



## From the Director: Looking Back ... and to the Future!

**H**appy New Year from the Herbarium! I wanted to take a moment and reflect back on 2023 before looking ahead to the coming year. First off, several rounds of thank-yous are in order. The Herbarium is blessed with a wonderful team of volunteer associates who help make our programming happen. Special thanks to our newest associate, Jonathan Ertelt, who has been helping us with our Webb Greenhouse plant collection arriving in Sewanee. Of course, these were mostly his charges when the plants were at Vanderbilt, so he knows them well! Jonathan trains students in horticultural practices, leads greenhouse tours, and tends to the plants over breaks when the students are away. Thanks to Yolande Gottfried who continues to contribute to the *Plant Press* and leads Herbarium walks. Finally, huge thanks, as always, to Mary Priestley, who tirelessly edits and writes for the *Plant Press* each quarter, curates art shows, runs nature journaling programs and leads wildflower walks. The Herbarium associates have always been key to the success of the Herbarium

over the years and I can't thank them enough.

Heartfelt thanks go out to the Block Family for their continued support of the Block Undergraduate Fellows Program. This is the Herbarium's flagship student program, and in 2023 it funded six students who conducted plant research, led student programs in the greenhouse, helped host conferences, assisted plant conservation in the region, and generally promoted plant awareness on campus. This has been an amazing cohort of students and it has been a joy to be able to work with them. I continue to be incredibly grateful to the many Friends of the Herbarium whose many contributions each year help to fund Herbarium programming and student research. Finally, I want to thank my colleagues (and former students) Sarah Neumann and Ashley Morris, whose research collaborations and friendship have made this the best sabbatical of my career so far. Exciting that Ashley's daughter, Olivia, will be starting at Sewanee in the fall! As part of my USDA grant with Sarah, I am serving on the graduate committees of two of her students at Tennessee State University, and it is like having grand-grad students!

Throughout 2023, the Herbarium engaged in series of events to promote the conservation of the upland forest of the Cumberland Plateau, including convening a forest roundtable for conservation advocates and hosting the annual Tennessee Plant Conservation Alliance meeting. I have maintained an ongoing commitment to being an advocate for Plateau forests since first arriving at Sewanee in 1994. It is hard to believe it has been more than 20 years now since my colleagues and I completed the EPA grant research that established the Landscape Analysis Lab at Sewanee and revealed how this ancient forest habitat was being eliminated by unsustainable industrial forestry practices. Our research back then helped change the paradigm regarding the ecological significance of this forest type in the state and led to major conservation efforts on the Plateau, including major land acquisitions by the state.

In 2024, the Herbarium will continue to promote forest conservation on the Cumberland Plateau. We will be actively working with public and private landowners to be sure that their forest management decisions are being guided by the best possible science.

## New Plant on the Block (in the House, even)

**W**hen we made our move from Nashville to Sewanee, part of what moved with us was more than 300 plants, one of which has recently been moved into the Webb Greenhouse. This plant is an Agave, a selection of the species *colorata* I believe, though it wasn't labeled that much when I purchased it from the Florida nursery Tropiflora more than 20 years ago. It has had a hard life as an Agave in temperate climes, as it has had to endure several months of low light dormancy every winter, which may help to

explain its relatively small size. It has lost lower leaves over the years, and the thick newer leaves don't grow quickly, so even at probably 25–26 years old, it's only about two feet in diameter with less than a dozen leaves total. Each leaf has an impressive sharp black point at the tip and curved reddish hooks along the sides that fade with age.

If you're not familiar with the Agave genus, this might sound like a plant not worth having around or growing for more than 20 years, but these plants can be

quite stunning. Commonly called century plants, they typically are much larger, and with a few exceptions do tend to be rather pointy, as they are plants found in dry ecosystems where without these points and hooks they might well be eaten or consumed for fluid. And in fact, we humans have been known to cut the nasty leaves off one (or more)



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# Thank You, 2023 Donors to the Friends of the Herbarium!

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## New Plant, continued from page 1

species and squeeze the juices out for fermenting purposes, providing us with mezcal and tequila. And while we do already have a couple of other species of Agave in the Webb Greenhouse, the one that I have moved from our sunroom to the greenhouse has something that none of the others have yet—a developing flower spike.

Over the past 30 days, from Dec. 15 when I first noticed the emerging spike and realized at seven inches what it was, through today, Jan. 13, when I was at the greenhouse to check on it and do some watering and cleaning, and it measured 41 inches, the spike has averaged just over an inch of growth per day. Some days were closer to a half inch, while some were up to an inch and a quarter, but regardless,

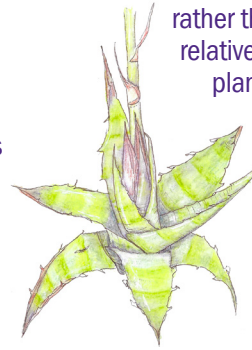
that's impressive growth. And, as it has still not started to initiate the side growths, which will eventually hold the flowers, I'm revising my original guess of three to four feet—I believe that the flower spike will top out at between four and five feet.

Some Agaves grow spikes more than 15 feet high. I've seen them in greenhouses where a pane of glass was removed to allow the spike to grow out through the top. But this is not the best time of year for that, and this one will not get that tall. They are called century plants because they grow for many, many years before flowering. And in most cases, they flower once, hopefully producing fruit from pollinated and fertilized flowers. Typically, then they die.

It's hard to predict when this one will start to flower—but it's still better than

two weeks off, since no secondary spikes or flower buds have started to emerge. There will undoubtedly be some Instagram posts, and possibly notification through *The Messenger* and the Herbarium Facebook page as well. It did seem like more students and other community members would have the opportunity to see it if it were in the campus greenhouse rather than my sunroom. So for a relatively short time, it's the new plant on the block. And then it will be gone. I hope that you'll get to see it, one way or another.

—Jonathan Ertelt



## Trails & Trilliums 2024 SAVE THE DATE!

Herbarium staffers are involved in putting on the Friends of the Parks' 20th Trails & Trilliums Naturalist Rally, scheduled for April 19–21 in Beersheba Springs. Registration opens in mid-February, along with lodging reservations at the Beersheba Springs Assembly. Stay tuned to the event's website, [trailsandtrilliums.org](https://trailsandtrilliums.org), for more information.

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## Winter Calendar of Events

### All Things Bright and Beautiful—a Salute to the Perimeter Trail and Its Environs

This exhibit, which was created by members of the Herbarium-sponsored nature journaling group, hangs in Stirling's Coffee House for the month of January. The trails of the Domain are steeped in the “wow factor,” things that take our breath away, and in this show the nature journalers highlight some of their favorites.

### Winter Green—an Introduction to Mosses and Ferns

**Saturday, Feb. 3, 10 a.m.–noon**  
**Yolande Gottfried**

Whether the groundhog told us that winter is here to stay or that spring is just around the corner, winter is a great time to take a look at mosses, some ferns, lichens, and other non-flowering plants. Herbarium Associate Yolande Gottfried will introduce interested participants to some of the “lower plants.” Do mosses freeze? What is an Irish valentine? Are lichens really plants? Come with your questions and specimens, if you like! We will meet indoors with specimens provided to examine and, weather permitting, take a short walk outdoors to see them in the field. Meet in the

Sewanee Herbarium on the first floor of Spencer Hall, Room 173, on the campus of the University of the South. The main entrance is across from duPont Library and there is parking behind the library. Bring a hand lens or a magnifying glass if you have one.

### Grocery Store Flower Botanicals Workshop—Mary Priestley

**Feb. 24, 9:30–11:30 a.m.**  
**Spencer Hall, Room 171**

Flowers that we pick up when we're grocery shopping brighten our winter days! For this workshop, we will choose individuals from among a bouquet of these colorful flowers to do a pen and ink illustration to which you may want to add color. There will be a demonstration of drawing alstroemeria, a lovely flower that is usually included in these mixes. We will start by dissecting a flower to see how it's constructed, then move on to drawing from life or tracing from a photograph. Bring a pencil and your cell phone; other materials will be provided. There is no cost, but please reserve so we know how many people to expect. mpriestley0150@gmail.com.

## THE SEWANEE PLANT PRESS

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## HERBARIUM PUBLICATIONS

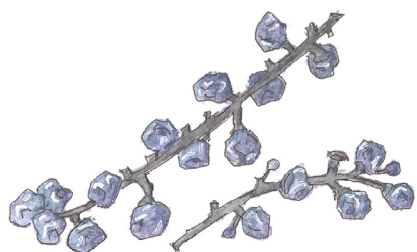
*Fiery Gizzard: Voices from the Wilderness*  
*What If Trees Could Walk?*  
*Trail Guide to Shakerag Hollow*  
*Sewanee Wildflowers in Watercolor*

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## Wild Grapes— More than Tarzan's Mode of Travel

**O**n a recent morning walk following a blustery night, I was surprised to come upon clusters of wild grapes, which had been shaken out of a vine that grew high into the branches of a chestnut oak tree. We have six native grape species on the Domain, and I think this one was *Vitis aestivalis* (summer grape).

The fruits were looking a bit decrepit, shriveled and dried to various degrees, hard as little rocks, and decidedly tart. But what an interesting foraging opportunity! I collected as many as I could find, took them home, consulted the internet, cooked up my little batch, and produced a beautiful jar of crystal-clear jelly, just a little more red in color than Welch's. And the flavor—another delight of this impromptu foraging event—was exquisite: unquestionably grape, with a most pleasing hint of rustic wildness.

I rarely forage, so I was inordinately proud to share my creation with friends and family. Interestingly, a common

observation (after “Oh what a treat!” and “Aren’t you something!”) was, “I didn’t know grapevines had grapes!” I suppose that stands to reason. After all, the productive end of a wild grapevine is usually so very high up in the forest canopy that we rarely notice it.

There are several types of woody vines, or lianas, in our flora. Some, like bittersweet and Oriental wisteria, are aggressive non-natives that harm the vegetation that they climb up and over. Native grapes, distinguished by the loose, flaky bark on older wood, are important members of our ecosystem. Grape flowers, fruits, and leaves all serve as food for both vertebrates and invertebrates, and the plants provide cover. And the vines, as we know, really are great for swinging!

—Mary Priestley

