



## **Maryland Native Plant Society**

P.O. Box 4877, Silver Spring, MD 20914 • [www.mdflora.org](http://www.mdflora.org)

**Appreciation • Education • Conservation**

October 31, 2016

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Dr. Angus Murphy, Chair of Plant Science and Landscape Architecture  
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Dear Drs. Loh, Beyrouthy and Murphy:

We write on behalf of Maryland Native Plant Society, an organization dedicated to education and conservation of Maryland's native plants and habitats. We are distressed to learn of the University's intention to withdraw critical support from the Norton Brown Herbarium.

Most of us are not professional scientists, but through our interest in Maryland's flora, we have come to appreciate the essential role of ongoing herbarium collections. No other herbarium comes close to matching the Norton Brown Herbarium in the scope of its Maryland collection and its institutional expertise in Maryland flora. Actual specimens are the most reliable—perhaps the only reliable—basis for determining the existence and geographic distribution of plant species, as well as their genetic and morphological characteristics. And Maryland has an exceptionally diverse flora, especially for a small state.

The Norton Brown Herbarium's superb work and public outreach have greatly enhanced the status of the University for citizens like ourselves who are interested in natural science. This year, the Curator of the Herbarium acted as the University coordinator to allow Maryland Native Plant Society to hold our annual conference at the University. Our members were honored to enjoy the University's lavish facilities, and we were proud to see our land-grant University continuing to fulfill its mission of nurturing research in botany, ecology, horticulture, and agriculture.

***Maryland Native Plant Society, Inc. is a Section 501(c)(3) organization  
that works to promote conservation of Maryland's native plants***

To appreciate the value of the Herbarium for Maryland citizens and educators, please take a look at the newly created Maryland Plant Atlas at [marylandplantatlas.org](http://marylandplantatlas.org). This project, to digitally record the distribution of all the plant species present in Maryland, represents the very best kind of collaboration among citizens, the Department of Natural Resources, and the University—which is represented by the Herbarium. The Atlas database is comprehensive; it includes various kinds of records. The most reliable of those records are the ones backed up by herbarium specimens. Unlike a photograph, a plant specimen can be examined years or decades later, for example, for genetic research, as well as to verify an identification. The Herbarium staff have recently made great progress in creating digital records of many thousand Herbarium specimens. Those records are being shared with scientists worldwide who now have the best of both worlds—efficient electronic sharing of information, backed up by professionally preserved physical specimens.

Without ongoing work by the Herbarium, we will lose our source of the most fundamental data about our natural and planted environment. The Herbarium is an essential component of the scientific infrastructure on which any botanically related research depends. As a land-grant university and one of the nation’s great research institutions, the University has a special responsibility to maintain and cherish this irreplaceable scientific resource. This is especially true given the rapid environmental changes currently anticipated. How can we hope to assess change if we have no idea where we started, and are not even monitoring the changes as they occur?

The Herbarium already operates on a shoestring, with only two dedicated employees. We understand that the University is no longer willing to fully fund their salaries, and thus intends to require the Herbarium to seek outside funding for its core operations. This is shocking news. Indeed, as you surely know, most sources of grants (including Maryland Native Plant Society) will not fund salaries and other core operations. Only the University can secure funding sufficient to ensure the Herbarium’s continued existence.

Luckily, the Herbarium currently employs a highly talented scientist as its Curator. But if its year-to-year existence is in peril, the Herbarium cannot attract or retain this level of competence in the long term. As an absolute bare minimum, the University must commit to secure employment for the Herbarium Curator and the Database Manager. Only then, when the continued existence of the Herbarium is assured, can outside funds realistically be sought for specific projects and, hopefully, for a dedicated endowment.

Given its importance to research and education, the Herbarium is a bargain—a small investment the University can and should make for the public good.

Yours truly,  
The Board of Directors of the Maryland Native Plant Society

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