

Life Home & Garden

'Flora of Virginia' now in bloom

After years of labor, William and Mary botanists complete atlas of Virginia's plants

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The long-awaited "Flora of Virginia" has deep roots in the Historic Triangle and the College of William and Mary.

The heavy book, which includes complete information about more than 3,000 Virginia native and naturalized plants, has been, by some counts, 11, 89 or 250 years in the making.

For Donna Ware, curator emeritus of The College of William and Mary's Herbarium, it's been a 42-year effort, with most of the heavy lifting over the last decade before the volume was published late last year.

For all of its biodiversity and interest, Virginia has been without a comprehensive flora for 250 years, since the printing of "Flora Virginia," based on colonial botanist John Clayton's specimens and written entirely in Latin.

The Virginia Academy of Science started considering a flora in the 1920s, Ware explained. When she arrived in Virginia in 1969, she joined that effort, although it continued to founder, with neither money nor staff devoted to it.

The four decades weren't lost, though. The state's herbaria were "growing to an adequate volume of specimens to undergird the flora," she said. "Finally, in the end of the 1990s, a conjunction of things happened that made the flora possible."

The Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation's Division of Natural Heritage became involved in the effort, together with botanists and organizations throughout the state.

Ware was asked to serve on the flora's board, which turned into an 11-year, 44-meeting assignment. Later, she contributed a chapter on the history of botanical exploration in the state along with author Nancy Hugo Ross. She also wrote a treatment for one of the plant families.

The book, at roughly 7 pounds, contains chapters not only on botanical history, but also a chapter on the different regions of the state, a list of Top 50 places Virginia plant lovers should see, a glossary and a full index organized by both scientific and common names.

Individual plant listings describe family, genus, species, habitat and status, formatted to help people identify a plant step-by-step by its characteristics. More than 1,000 plants are illustrated in pen-and-ink drawings.

Ware said the authors and committees worked hard to strike the right balance in making the flora relevant to the scientific community while still being useful and accessible to the growing number of amateur botanists and biologists.

An app for tablets and smartphones is in the works now that will integrate data from Natural Heritage, a division of the Virginia



Donna Ware looks at an American Winterberry wondering if it was mentioned in "Flora Virginica," the original flora of Virginia from 250 years ago.

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Order via Amazon or brit.org/brit-press/books/virginia. More info: www.floraofvirginia.org

Department of Conservation and Recreation, and from the Digital Atlas of the Virginia Flora (<http://vaplantatas.org>).

"That was a big goal, to make it as user-friendly as possible," she said. "People are just vitally interested in plants, and they are of vital interest to us."

Ware also has been helping with promotion, giving a talk last month to the John Clayton Chapter of the Virginia Native Plant Society on how to use the book. Without a state flora, botanists were left checking multiple sources. Ware spread out five different reference books, easily weighing a total of 20 pounds, which she relied on before the flora was published.

It's even harder for those with an interest but not the formal background, she said. "In my experience, checking specimens on the Internet, there's such a high misidentification rate, you can really get in trouble."

"I use it every day," said Beth Chambers, who succeeded Ware as William and Mary's Herbarium curator. "There have been maybe one or two work days I haven't used it."



"Flora of Virginia" is the first attempt in 250 years to list the state's plant life. It runs more than 1,500 pages and weighs 7 pounds.

Much of the "Flora of Virginia" is based on the college's Herbarium. Chambers said thousands of the university's plant specimens were lent for the flora project.

Pat Baldwin, a Hampton resident who has volunteered at the Herbarium for more than 30 years, has cataloged five new

than any other university because of the students that they turned out all over the state for field biology work.

"We quantified it at some point," she said, looking over her office shelves. "But we have about two dozen floras that have been done here in about 40 or 50 years. Donna Ware and Gus Hall added so much to Virginia's understanding, student by student, decade after decade. That contributed greatly to our understanding of where these plants are."

So far, "Flora of Virginia" has been a smash hit. More than half of the first print run of 3,500 copies has been sold, and Editor Bland Crowder said, a second printing is on the horizon. Crowder also has local roots, having attended William and Mary and worked for Ware in its Herbarium.

He said organizers were hesitant to order a large printing, afraid sales would languish. "We had no way of knowing how the sales were going to go," he said. "It doesn't seem like this is going to be an issue because it's selling like crazy."

Although \$79.99, botanists say the "Flora of Virginia" is a bargain. Crowder and Chambers both said the volume, or a similar textbook, could run up to \$200, but financial donations from groups and individuals, collected dutifully year after year, helped keep the price down.