Cultivated Herbarium Vouchers

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The Cultivated Herbarium of the Arnold Arboretum contains a small but significant part of the more than 5 million dried and pressed plants held by Harvard University. Its approximately 130,000 sheets consist of cuttings of flowers, fruits, and vegetative material cut from plants at the Arboretum and other temperate locations around the world. The specimens from our living collection are called vouchers, because they provide verifiable documentation of the identity of the Arboretum’s accessioned plants.

There is an art to preserving plants for science. For more than 25 years, this has been the focus of my work, and I have produced more than 168,000 herbarium sheets using methods for preserving these specimens for long-term study. The peony depicted here provides a good example. Clipped from an accession in our landscape, the flower was pressed between layers of paper, corrugates, and foam, and placed in a dryer which removed moisture rapidly enough that much of its vivid color remains. The label at the bottom of the sheet records information that connects this flower to both the original plant in the landscape and its important curatorial documentation.

After a spell in the freezer to eliminate any lingering pests, the branch was arranged on acid-free paper with its taxonomic features readily observable. I affixed the specimen to the paper with full-strength glue for stems and diluted glue on the undersides of the petals and leaves, twisting the leaf on the right to display its opposite surface. Finally, I used gummed-linen strips to further secure the specimen to the paper, to prevent its becoming detached when handled or sent out for study.

Creating long-lasting vouchers requires meticulousness and patience as well as artistic and scientific sensitivity. As an aesthetic object these sheets can be quite beautiful with strong graphic appeal. When collected from the wild, they represent an invaluable resource in documenting the flora of the world as plants disappear from their habitats. At the Arboretum, our vouchers provide an essential part of our record keeping, documenting both our plants and the collecting efforts of individuals over the past 140 years of our history.