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MEDIA RELEASE



Introducing the weird and wonderful world of the Forgotten Flora

What do fungi and stonewash jeans have in common? What has a moss got to do with the Tyrolean iceman? What are the tallest mosses? What is a reindeer moss? How can lichens read pollution?

The answers to these questions and many more will be answered in a remarkable free touring exhibition, *Hidden in Plain View: the forgotten flora*, staged by the Royal Botanic Gardens Melbourne.

Currently touring nationally, **Hidden in plain view: the Forgotten Flora** is on at the National Museum of Australia in Canberra until 9 June 2008 before going onto Launceston, Geelong and Adelaide.

Dr Teresa Lebel, one of the organisers, says the exhibition is about encouraging people to investigate the influence of the forgotten flora on their daily lives through curiosities, rarities, and everyday items, and gain an understanding of the importance of conserving the 'often overlooked' in our world.

Hidden in plain view: the Forgotten Flora features over 100 objects including original botanical paintings, historical and contemporary illustrations, books and textiles, and herbarium specimens from the Victorian State Botanical Collection held at the National Herbarium of Victoria.

Dr Lebel says visitors will see many items that have never been viewed by the public due to their precious and fragile nature.

A centrepiece of the exhibition is the microscope acquired by Ferdinand Mueller, Victoria's first Government Botanist and founding Director of the Royal Botanic Gardens Melbourne, from London in 1857 for the grand total of £4.4, at the time offering to 'pay for it in books and specimens'.

"This microscope would have been an essential tool of trade for a botanist: between 1847 and 1877 Mueller collected approximately 23,000 specimens for the Herbarium, and more than 15,000 specimens were sent to him by other collectors," according to Dr Lebel.

Another one of the historical treasures on show is Richard Bastow's *Key to Australian Mosses* and the associated reference sets of specimens. Bastow, a contemporary and friend of Mueller, was forced to sell his own 'beautiful' microscope to settle his debts before he moved from Hobart to Victoria in 1887.

Among the other collectors, scientists and botanical artists represented in the exhibition are Henry Tisdall, a keen plant collector and teacher from Walhalla who was encouraged by Mueller to collect fungi; Otto Tepper, another of Mueller's protégés, who sent him hundreds of specimens from South Australia and was later to move from school teaching to become an

entomologist; and Ilma Stone, one of only 18 women at The University of Melbourne when she studied botany in the 1930s.

As for the answers to those tricky questions?

What has a moss got to do with the Tyrolean iceman?

The presence of a particular moss species in the Tyrolean Iceman's clothes helped scientists establish that the iceman had most probably travelled to the Alps from the south ('modern Italy') and not from Austria. (Dickson et al. 1996)

What are some of the tallest mosses?

In Australia *Dawsonia superba* var. *pulchra*, which looks like a pine seedling, is the tallest moss; *Dendoligotrichum dendroides*, which grows between 20-40 cm tall, is New Zealand's tallest moss. This plant resembles a miniature palm tree.

What is 'reindeer moss'?

'Reindeer moss' is not a moss but a lichen called *Cladonia* subgenus *Cladina*. In Europe it is used to make Christmas wreaths and for use in model building.

Why are lichens great readers of pollution?

They have enormous sensitivity to pollution; accumulating heavy metals or other toxic substances readily. The absence or presence of particular species can indicate what is causing and how bad the pollution in a given area is.

How do you get the stone-wash effect on jeans?

Stone-washed jeans are not, as you might think, produced by many little old ladies beating them on riverside rocks, but by being dunked into vats of fungal culture. The fungus, *Trichoderma reesii*, was originally isolated from the fabric of a decaying tent on the South Pacific island of Samoa. Enzymes from the fungus, called cellulases, partially and irregularly digest the cotton (cellulose) in the jeans, creating the 'stone-washed' appearance.

Hidden in plain view: the Forgotten Flora has received assistance from Museums Australia (Victoria) Regional Exhibition Touring Fund (RETI), the Victorian Government through Arts Victoria (Touring Victoria) and the Community Support Fund, the Australian Government through Visions of Australia, the William Buckland Foundation, the Gordon Darling Foundation, and the Director's Circle at the Royal Botanic Gardens Melbourne.

Tour dates:

13 March - 9 June 2008

National Museum of Australia, Canberra

16 August - 16 November 2008

Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery, Launceston

25 February - 8 April 2009

Gordon Gallery, Geelong

5 June - 30 September 2009

Museum of Economic Botany, Adelaide Botanic Garden

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Jpegs are available.