

Ribbens, Eric. 2010. The Wired Herbarium #9: vPLANTS. In *The Vasculum* (newsletter of the Society for Herbarium Curators) 5(2), July 2010.

In the move to online data, an individual herbarium may provide partial or complete specimen data. However, often consortiums present combined data, often oriented around a geographic theme. It can be frustrating to use these websites to access herbarium records, since they only provide data for specimens within the geographic area, but these sites are often fascinating regional summaries.

vPlants, <http://www.vplants.org/>, is a good example of a geographically restricted site. Vplants is an online herbarium of the Chicago region, and combines data for 80,000 specimens from the Field Museum, the Chicago Botanic Garden, and Morton Arboretum. The “Chicago Region” is defined as 24 counties in four states, covering generally the southern portion of Lake Michigan and nearby counties dominated by the Lake Michigan sand and hydrology.

The overall site is very well designed. Tabs on the left and the top of the main screen easily connect to the various sites. I probably would not use the language “Next:” to refer to other pages at the bottom of each page, because I suspect most webpage users do not think of a webpage as a linear series of pages, in which one moves next to next to next.

The heart of the page, of course, is the search engine. Searches can be conducted for specific taxa, particular collectors, or by location. Well-placed disclaimers explain database issues. For example, many specimens are not coded by city or by habitat.

A successful search returns a list of specimens. The list indicates the search parameters, and for each specimen the state, county, date, and collector name are given, as well as the herbarium containing the specimen. Many specimens have been scanned, and specimens with images available are clearly marked. However, there is no map-generating function incorporated in the search results. Searching for *Acalypha virginica* will return a list of three specimens, in Grundy, Cook, and DuPage Counties, but if the user isn’t already aware that Grundy County does not connect with Cook and DuPage Counties, the only way to find out is to return to the root page and click on the county tab.

I found it slightly confusing that each of these items are listed and marked as having links, but the various items all connect to the same specimen page. I was expecting that clicking on the county, for example, would tell me more about that county, or clicking on the collector name would connect me to a brief biography of that collector.

Curiously, clicking on a specimen description connects to a specimen page, but layered beneath that is a second specimen page. The first specimen page does not contain all of the information on the page, but does indicate additional information is available and provides links to that page. Scanned specimens have downloadable image files.

The three partner herbaria are nicely described from the root page, but it would be nice to have direct links to their online databases for more comprehensive collection searches. It is also not

clear whether the data represent their entire Chicago region holdings.

Thus, this webpage presents both the problem and the promise of regional webpages. This is not a good site to visit if you are interested in determining what the Field Museum holds for a particular species. However, it integrates the holdings of three herbaria, promises to add additional herbaria, and presents the information clearly and crisply in a user-accessible style. While I think the search list components (county, collector, in particular) should link to images or pages about those components, vPlants is a well-designed example of a geographic portal.