

## 2020 Elizabeth Anne Bartholomew Award Wendy B. Zomlefer



Photo by Harald Schemm

Wendy Zomlefer (right)

Honoring the memory of Elizabeth Ann Bartholomew, this annual award is presented by the Southern Appalachian Botanical Society (SABS) to “individuals who have also distinguished themselves in professional and public service that advances our knowledge and appreciation of the world of plants and their scientific, cultural, and aesthetic values, and/or exceptional service to the society.” Wendy B. Zomlefer, Professor *Emeritus* of Plant Sciences at the University of Georgia, was the recipient of this award for 2020. Wendy has had a remarkable tripartite career as scientific illustrator, herbarium curator, and botany professor. Most recently (since 2000), she served on the faculty in the Department of Plant Biology at University of Georgia, Athens, as Curator of GA Herbarium, retiring as Professor in December 2019.

Wendy’s career emphases started in an unlikely place: a factory town (Leominster, Massachusetts) when it was called the “Plastics Capital of the World.” Her father, Jack, was a Ph.D. organic chemist who owned a plastics manufacturing company, and her mother, Dorothy, was a homemaker. Encouraged by her parents, siblings, and others in her hometown, Wendy became interested in art and natural history at an early age. A neighbor, Carol Shorey, invited her (at the age of five) on family bird-

watching outings, and Wendy’s parents installed a bird feeder outside a window of their house to encourage this interest. At that time, Wendy also set up a little natural history museum in the basement of the family home amid the washing machine and clotheslines and invited neighborhood kids to see her treasures—mostly bird nests, rocks/minerals, insects, seashells, and fossils. Her life-long passion for plants, though, was sparked by her third-grade teacher, Mrs. McCall, who had a yearly spring wildflower hunt competition. Wendy found a specimen of one-flowered cancer root (*Orobanche uniflora*) that her teacher, not knowing what it was, dismissed as a “weed.” Wendy was determined to figure out this odd plant and searched through wildflower books at the public library until she found it!

Wendy’s ongoing interests in science were further encouraged by her seventh-grade teacher, John Gallagher. He treated girls and boys equally, which was very unusual in that era (mid-1960s). His general science course and science club activities included an outing to the Boston Museum of Science and a local field trip to a boggy area, where Wendy discovered sundews (*Drosera rotundifolia*). He required a lab notebook with drawings, and of course, Wendy loved producing those illustrations! She also won first place at the science fair that year for her class project on local flora that included a pressed plant collection and germinating pollen grains in various sugar solutions.

Wendy received her undergraduate education at the University of Vermont, where she had broad training in botany, was inducted into Phi Beta Kappa, and graduated *summa cum laude* with a B.S. in Botany in 1976. She served as an undergraduate teaching and research assistant under various

professors, and as a volunteer in the Pringle Herbarium with Curator Dave Barrington. Her Senior Project, advised by ecologist Hub Vogelmann, was an illustrated and vouchered field guide, *Flora of Colchester Bog*, that was published by the Botany Department. Upon graduating, she immediately took a position at the Marie Selby Botanical Gardens in Sarasota, Florida, as staff illustrator for the journal *Selbyana* and curatorial assistant at SEL Herbarium. Coming from New England, Wendy was delighted and overwhelmed by the diversity of the subtropical flora of southern Florida. Working under renowned orchidologist Calaway Dodson, she assisted with field work in Ecuador where she was introduced to the fantastic world of orchids (Orchidaceae), gesneriads (Gesneriaceae), and gingers (Zingiberaceae).

At Selby, Wendy was also fortunate to meet Marion Sheehan, noted botanical illustrator, who offered valuable criticism and suggestions. This interaction motivated Wendy to begin graduate school in 1978 at University of Florida in Gainesville, where Sheehan was associated with the Department of Horticulture. As Walter Judd's first graduate student, Wendy earned her M.S. in Botany in 1980. Her thesis was an illustrated guide, "Common Florida Angiosperm Families," that was eventually expanded and published as two volumes devoted to Florida angiosperm families, and ultimately as a single comprehensive book on angiosperm plant families of the southeastern United States. The latter is dedicated to her mother, who taught her the rudiments of effective writing.

In 1981, Wendy was hired as the staff scientific illustrator at the Florida Museum of Natural History, University of Florida, where for over 12 years she primarily illustrated fish, herps, and fossils (mostly mammalian bones and teeth) for the scientific staff. While working there as a scientific illustrator, Wendy started Ph.D. graduate work in botany under the direction of bryologist Dana Griffin. Her dissertation, "A Revision of *Rigodium* (*Musci*: Rigodiaceae)," completed in 1991, resulted in the publication of a monograph and four papers. During this phase of her education, Wendy attended Howard Crum's summer bryology course at the University of Michigan Field Station at Douglas Lake, while serving as his teaching assistant.

Until 2000, Wendy continued her work in scientific illustration as a free-lance consultant, and due to her volunteer work at University of Florida Herbarium (FLAS), was also appointed Adjunct Assistant Curator. During this time, she learned the nuts and bolts of herbarium curation under the tutelage of FLAS Collections Manager Kent Perkins and worked for him on plant identifications for UF's agricultural college's extension service. From 1995–1999 she was also an NSF-funded Post-Doctoral Associate under Walter Judd, monographing petaloid monocots for the *Generic Flora of the Southeastern United States*. Wendy describes her post-doc with Walt as the most rewarding and enjoyable professional experience of her life. During this period, orchidologists Norris Williams and Mark Whitten very generously allowed her to participate in their gene-sequencing course and to use their lab for her work with petaloid monocots, and she subsequently collaborated with them on several publications.

The next destination in Wendy's career was the University of Georgia in 2000. Two new colleagues, chemotaxonomist David Giannasi and population geneticist James Hamrick, facilitated her navigation in a very unfamiliar departmental culture. She served as curator of the University of Georgia Herbarium (GA) for nearly 20 years, securing numerous grants that enabled major infrastructural enhancement of the herbarium (high-density storage system), digitization of the herbarium, and voucher-based field research that added thousands of specimens to the collection. Through her tireless efforts, the GA Herbarium grew by more than 60,000 specimens, and Wendy was responsible for infrastructural improvements that secured the collection for the foreseeable future. She was also selfless in promoting the stature and advancement of smaller collections in Georgia through her leadership in collaborative research efforts funded by the National Science Foundation, including a collaborative grant that greatly advanced efforts at the Valdosta State University Herbarium (VSC).

While at UGA, Wendy taught plant taxonomy, botanical illustration, natural history museum curatorship, graduate and undergraduate independent research, and freshman seminars such as "Plants of the Bible" and "Discover the World of Plants!" She mentored numerous graduate and undergraduate students in floristic research and herbarium curation, and conducted floristic

inventories of significant natural areas in Georgia, including Cumberland Island, blackland prairies of middle Georgia, and piedmont glades. At UGA, she also met her husband, Harald Scherm, a plant pathologist and fellow professor.

Wendy has made significant contributions through her research in the phylogenetics of petaloid monocots, particularly Melanthiaceae (*Liliales*) and the flora of the southeastern United States (especially endemic and rare plants), including voucher-based vegetation survey work of natural areas in Georgia and Florida. The results of her research have been disseminated through publication of more than 100 journal articles, abstracts, and databases. Wendy is also author and illustrator of a widely used textbook, *Guide to Flowering Plant Families* (University of North Carolina Press, 1994), which has been a mainstay in introductory plant taxonomy courses across the country and was translated into Spanish in 2004. She has also contributed to numerous popular publications, such as various National Audubon Society field guides.

Wendy's outreach efforts have been a model for other curators in Georgia and the region. Bringing her research in floristic and collection-based botany before the scientific community, students, and the general public, she has given a wide variety of presentations on her systematics research, flora of Georgia, and botanical illustration. Wendy has also been a passionate and effective advocate for herbaria, promoting the value and importance of biodiversity collections to diverse and broad audiences through workshops sponsored by the National Science Foundation, Southern Appalachian Botanical Society, SERNEC, and Society of Herbarium Curators. Inspired by Zach Murrell and other colleagues in SERNEC, she founded the Georgia Herbarium Consortium (with collaborator David Giannasi), and she has done much to bring herbarium curators together and to promote herbaria within the state.

Wendy has served the American Society of Plant Taxonomists as a member of various committees and as Associate Editor of *Systematic Botany* (2002-2006). She was also a Taxonomic Editor for the *Flora of North America* (Vol. 26, *Liliales* and *Orchidales*). She has been an active member of numerous other professional societies devoted to the advancement of botany and herbaria, and she has played a crucial leadership role in organizing and nurturing the Georgia Herbarium Alliance, revitalizing interest in Georgia's herbaria. Wendy has served the SABS as Council Member-at-Large (2009-2011), Chair of the Student Awards Committee (2010-2011), President-elect (2011-2012), President (2012-2014), and Past President (2014-2015); and she has supported *Castanea* through the publication of her own research papers and reviews of numerous articles submitted to the journal.

Since her retirement in December 2019, Wendy has continued her work in the GA Herbarium as a volunteer, processing specimens, which she says has provided a lot of time to contemplate her life. Those of us in academia especially appreciate that learning is a life-long process, facilitated by a nurturing environment. In reflecting on her career, Wendy is full of gratitude to everyone—family, friends, and colleagues—who encouraged and mentored her along the path to new locales and novel plants. She regrets that only a few of those individuals could be acknowledged here.

— J. Richard Carter, Valdosta State University

Editors Note: I have long identified Wendy as my first botanical hero. It was her *Guide to the Flowering Plant Families* that solidified my interest in becoming a plant systematist.

— Chris Randle