

A NOTE ON THE FOREST RESEARCH CENTRE HERBARIUM,
COIMBATORE

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Publication of the Flora of British India by J. D. Hooker and his co-workers created an awakening among botanists, and forest officers on the need of regional and provincial floras.

Immediate necessity of such floras was felt particularly by serving forest officers as they needed a sound basic knowledge of wild plants in the forests to plan forestry operations. As most of them had their training in Europe, their knowledge in tropical Botany was limited. Therefore, many of them developed an interest and made large collections of plants from the forests in the different parts of the country. These formed the foundation of many regional and provincial herbaria. The Forest Research Centre Herbarium, Coimbatore, in which mainly, collections of Fischer, Bourdillon and Rama Rao are deposited is one such herbarium.

This herbarium had its beginning in 1911 when Cecil Ernest Claude Fischer was posted to the Forest Service in Madras. He made extensive collections from Anamalais till his retirement. During the period of his service he also made collections from Nilgiris, Palanis and North Coimbatore areas of Tamil Nadu and Seshachalam Hills and Ganjam District of Andhra Pradesh. The original collections from all these areas were sent to the Indian Botanic Gardens, Calcutta. Here, may be quoted Fischer's own words about his work on Anamalais, "My own acquaintance with the Anamalais dates from 1911. I was in forest charge of the south Coimbatore Forest Division, which includes these hills, from 1911 to September

1915 and I paid two or three subsequent visits in the Western extremity. Every opportunity was taken during my official tours to collect botanical specimens and to take notes. The majority of specimens obtained were sent to the herbarium of the Royal Botanic Garden, Calcutta"

Duplicates of most of Fischer's collections are deposited in the Forest Research Herbarium. Collections of Bourdillon and Rama Rao from the forest areas of Travancore (now in Kerala) were also added to this herbarium. These collections, maintained at the Conservator's Office at Coimbatore till 1925 were later transferred to the Silviculturists' Office at Ootacamund. After the Second World War when Grass Forest Museum was reopened in 1947, the herbarium collections from Ootacamund were also shifted to the Museum. These collections remained in the museum till 1962.

In 1959, a regional biological research centre of the Forest Research Institute, Dehra Dun, was opened at Coimbatore with the following branches viz. Silviculture and Soil Sciences, Botany, Mycology and Entomology, to cater to the needs of the Southern States. The Botany branch of this centre started functioning in August 1962. The research project assigned to this branch was : general survey, collection and identification of plants of forestry importance, to build up a herbarium and museum. As an adjunct to the herbarium, a botanical garden cum arboretum was started in 1973.

The valuable collections of Fischer mostly from Anamalais, Nilgiris and Palani Hill tops of Tamil Nadu and from the hills of Andhra Pradesh, of T. F. Bourdillon and Rama Rao from Travancore area of the present Kerala State and miscellaneous collections by many others form the old and reference collections. Writings of Fischer reveal that the specimens collected by him were identified either at the Indian Botanic Gardens, Calcutta or at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, England. The details of the collections are as follows :

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| C. E. C. Fischer | — | 2,836 sheets |
| T. F. Bourdillon | — | 235 „ |
| M. Rama Rao | — | 271 „ |
| P. F. Fyson | — | 107 „ |
| Miscellaneous | — | 806 „ |

The valuable collections of entire grass plants from Anamalai Hills and other localities of Tamil Nadu mounted on large-sized herbarium sheets (61.5 × 48.5 cm) numbering 230 are also kept here.

Since the inception of the Botany branch in 1962, botanical collection tours were undertaken to the forests of Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Kerala and Tamil Nadu. During these tours collections were made giving more importance to arborescent species and plants of medicinal and economic importance. As far as possible, details of vegetative characters were noted. It is proposed to prepare Forest Floras of different states incorporating as many field characters as possible for easy identification, during any part of the year. The present provincial floras have inadequate information on vegetative characters.

The total number of herbarium sheets incorporated till date exceeds 12,500.

This herbarium renders technical help in the identification of plants to the Forest Officers at the time of revision of Forest Working Plans. Technical help in identification, giving information regarding distribution, abundance, economic importance and medicinal values of species to forest based industries and pharmaceutical firms is rendered as and when required.

Students from Universities and other scientific institutions specialising in Taxonomy refer the herbarium during revisionary and monographic studies of specific groups of plants. Regular exchange of duplicate specimens with other institutions is maintained. A few isotypes are also deposited in this herbarium.

A botanical garden cum arboretum is being developed as an adjunct of the Botany branch since 1973.

A green house of size 40' × 20' with a sunken water tank in the middle gives a cool humid atmosphere and enables growing of orchids, aroids, ferns, Begonias, Commelinas and other humid loving plants.

The glass house, the side walls and the roof of which are covered with the indigenously manufactured 'tufflite' E grade glass sheets and fitted with electronically controlled mist propagation equipment is an invaluable addition and a centre of attraction of the garden. The main purpose of this glass house is to raise large number of planting materials of important forest trees which are either poor in natural regeneration or are difficult to be raised by normal vegetative means. Rooted cuttings of a number of woody species of this nature were successfully raised here and are planted in the garden. Propagation of teak and other woody species from bud sprouts has been tried with very encouraging results.