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Dr. Gerry Moore examines a stalk of Persicaria, or lady's thumb. Photo: Andrea Murad

by **ANDREA MURAD**

Walk into the office of Dr. Gerry Moore, director of science at the **Brooklyn Botanical Garden (http://www.bbg.org)** , and be prepared for what might seem an odd mashup in the field of plant taxonomy.

The expected regional maps and framed plant illustrations vie for space with World Series banners. An antique green metal container used to carry field samples dangles from the wall, jammed with Simpsons baseball figurines and a soft baseball decorated with a crossword puzzle. A Louisville Slugger rests on top. Vases on the file cabinet overflow with baseballs. There are no live plants.

“I have a pretty strong interest in baseball,” Moore, 43, admitted on a recent Tuesday.

But in fact, his dual obsession with the sport and the science is neither unique nor superficial. The type of mind that loves the exacting rules of plant nomenclature feels at home with the arcane rules of baseball, according to Dr. Susan Pell, who works with Moore.

“The obsession isn’t with the people,” she said. “It’s with the history and tradition of baseball.”

When Moore tried to solve with one of botany’s perennial problems – historical plant names that do not follow the current rules – he found inspiration in Major League Baseball’s Official Rules, in the section on batting out of order. It is a connection arguably only taxonomists could understand – and they did. After he presented his paper in 2005 at the 17th International Botanical Congress in Vienna, Austria, his suggested changes were embraced. For mistaken names, botany now follows baseball rules.

A copy of the Official Rules, with handwritten notes speckling the margins throughout, sits on a shelf in Moore’s office, wedged between tomes on the rules for naming plants, Latin grammar, and the historical pride of the field: the detailed regional botanical accounts called floras.

All feed his passion for the mysteries of identifying, describing, naming, and classifying plants. “Of all the things I do, two things I look forward to are collecting plants in the field and spending time identifying them,” he said. “I like the idea of having something in front of you that you don’t know what it is.”

While the garden’s mission is to grow plants, Moore conducts field research. His real office is not the jumbled physical space with walls, books, desk, and a computer. It is anywhere plants grow.

On any given day during spring and summer, he can be found roaming Long Island, New York City, southern

Connecticut or the northern parts of New Jersey searching for plants to record and identify as part of his work on a flora of the New York metropolitan area.

The project was founded in 1990 by the late Dr. Steven Clemants, Moore's predecessor at the gardens. For the past nine years, Moore has thrown himself into this work, taking full advantage of technology in the process. Pick a plant and he will show on his computer screen whether and where it is thriving, and how often it's found within the 67,650 square miles encompassed by the **New York Metropolitan Flora (http://www.bbg.org/sci/nymf)** .

There are immediate broader benefits to his knowledge for conservationists, since the vegetation he tracks provides fodder and refuge for local wildlife – or threatens it.

In some cases, invasive plants, introduced innocently to decorate landscaped yards, have spread far beyond, making life for native plants difficult, if not impossible.

Birds enjoy the red fruit of the **Japanese barberry (http://www.nps.gov/plants/ALIEN/fact/beth1.htm)** , a spiny shrub spread as they drop the berries seeds in flight. It grows thickly in forested area, robbing the more nutritive, native plants deer prefer of air and space.

The graceful but voracious **purple loosestrife (http://www.nps.gov/plants/ALIEN/fact/lysa1.htm)** attacks wetlands, its thick spear-like stalks tipped with a cluster of small purple flowers smothering grasses and sedges and forcing endangered orchids and waterfowl from their habitats.

"There are growing efforts to regulate some of these invasive plants because their impacts to natural habitats are so severe," Moore said. "Many states have regulations banning their sale. They dominate ecosystems and their growth can be as thick as bamboo."

The National Park Service lists these green invaders on their **Website (http://www.invasive.org/weedus/)** , a botanical "Least Wanted" list.

On the happier side, Moore knows where to find the rare native orchid ***Arethusa bulbosa (http://nymf.bbg.org/species/2144)*** , or dragon's mouth, at John F. Kennedy International Airport, its purplish pink straight petals surrounding one large rippled-edge petal in a roar of color.

He even found fig trees in a vacant lot near Pratt Institute in Prospect Heights, Brooklyn. He marvels that the fruit-bearing trees have adapted to New York's long, cold winters, far harsher than their native Mediterranean climate.

He, too, has adapted to his surroundings.

"If you're in a tropic botany, you're oftentimes climbing trees," he said in a speech at the 2006 **Symposium: What is Local? Genetics & Plant Selection in the Urban Context (http://www.nycgovparks.org/sub_about/parks_divisions/gnpc/symposium.html)** at the American Museum of Natural History. "In the New York metropolitan area, sometimes you find yourself climbing fences to get where you need to go."

Sometimes, he just walks the neighborhood surrounding the gardens, armed with his geologist hammer and field press. The bulky press, which will protect his specimens, is nothing more than two one-foot-by-two-feet plywood boards sandwiching sheets of newspaper, held together by a long yellow strap.

On the recent Wednesday, Moore walked out into Crown Heights, heading along Montgomery Street to Franklin Street, passing various potted plants without a dignifying glance. He stopped at the sight of a five-foot-high collection of stalks mugging a street sign. Near its top, the aggressor proudly displayed six-inch- leaves and four-inch clusters of tiny purplish-pink flowers in bloom and bud.

He crouched and chopped away at the base of one stalk.

"*Persicaria*, or lady's thumb," he said, examining the cut stem in his hand. "We have a number of species of these that have come into the city, some native, some not native. And we're working on trying to identify these a little better."

Moore crouched again to section the stalk on the concrete. He loosened the field's press's yellow strap, lifted the plywood, and nestled the plant's pieces between the paper sheets.

Such samples, taken without real damage to the plant, advance science without interrupting nature. "You can identify what you saw in ways no photo or description can," Moore said.

Back at his office, the preservation process begins. The specimens move to a drying press, a corrugated cardboard contraption that fits in what looks like an oversized stainless steel refrigerator but is more like a low-power convection oven The temperature is set for a maximum of 120 degrees Fahrenheit for one to two days. "If it gets too hot, the material in the plant starts to stew," Moore noted.

Dried samples containing any combination of crisp green leaves, stems, flowers, roots, and seeds are identified, mounted on special paper, and stored in a cool room holding a vast set of filing cabinets. Each sheet in the herbarium is meticulously labeled with the date and location the specimen was taken, and its scientific name. The chill keeps insects from making a meal of the collection.

The Brooklyn Botanical Garden's herbarium boasts about 250,000 specimens, most from the New York Metropolitan area, some dating back to the 1700's. It is a trove for science, and a memorial to the botanists of yore, who, like Moore, made the science a way of life.

Or, as the joke among botanists goes: What's the difference between a banker and a botanist? A banker retires. Botanists don't retire – they just die.

And meanwhile, some, like Moore, catch a baseball game.

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