

Royal Botanic Gardens

Kew

Inspiring futures



Aurelie Grall

Tell us about your job

I am a Senior Curator-Botanist in the Africa & Madagascar Team at Kew. In the Kew Herbarium we host thousands of collections that were made in Africa and Madagascar over the years and my role is to make those collections accessible to all so the Flora of Africa is better understood and conserved.

Why is science important in your career?

Science is what drives me every day. If we understand plants better, maybe we can improve agriculture, conserve biodiversity and improve livelihoods. 100 years ago, botanists did not know that future scientists would use herbarium collections to extract DNA. Who knows how science will use our collections in 50 years? I find that very exciting.

What is your average work day like?

I often have scientific visitors so I welcome them and explain how to use the herbarium. If I don't have too many emails to deal with, I will incorporate new herbarium specimens to the collections. I need to be very thorough for this task because if one specimen goes to the wrong place it might be lost forever! Often, I will also have plants to identify. This is my favourite activity.

Did you go to university? If so, what did you study? If not, what did you do after leaving school?

Yes, I studied General Biology first, and then specialised in Systematics, a branch of biology that deals with classifying living things and giving them names. Systematicians study evolution patterns and how species are related. I also studied how to care for natural history collections and communicate using them.

What sort of personality traits do you have that help you in your career?

I love what I do and I'm constantly looking for more opportunities to learn. I also really enjoy team work and I am always happy and ready to help. This is an important skill for a curator as most of the time our role is to support the research, welcome visiting scientists, and make sure that the specimens are available to the community.

What helped you get your role at Kew?

Before joining Kew, I had experience studying and working in herbaria in France (Paris, Montpellier) and in the Natural History Museum, London. I was also very motivated which helped me to get this role.

Moreover, I speak French fluently and this was a desirable skill on the job profile as several of our African scientific partners do not speak English.

What advice would you give to someone considering a career like yours?

My advice would be always do your best, explore all the possibilities, and don't be too impatient. I find that being honest, hard-working and open usually pays off. But often it takes years of experience to build up enough knowledge to do this job: there are so many plant families, collectors, countries, regulations, it's best to have several different experiences, even if it is not exactly in curation. For example, experiences in digitisation, conservation, fieldwork, etc. added up would all be very beneficial to a future curator!

What do you want people to know about your work?

The Herbarium is much more than just a collection of dead plants. It is a hive of people and specimens interacting all the time. There are never two days which are the same!

I work with people from many different cultures and nationalities. You'll find some of the best colleagues here at Kew.

Plants are fascinating. The more you know about them, the more you want to learn! Many groups of plants are currently understudied. We need more people to study all those plants!

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