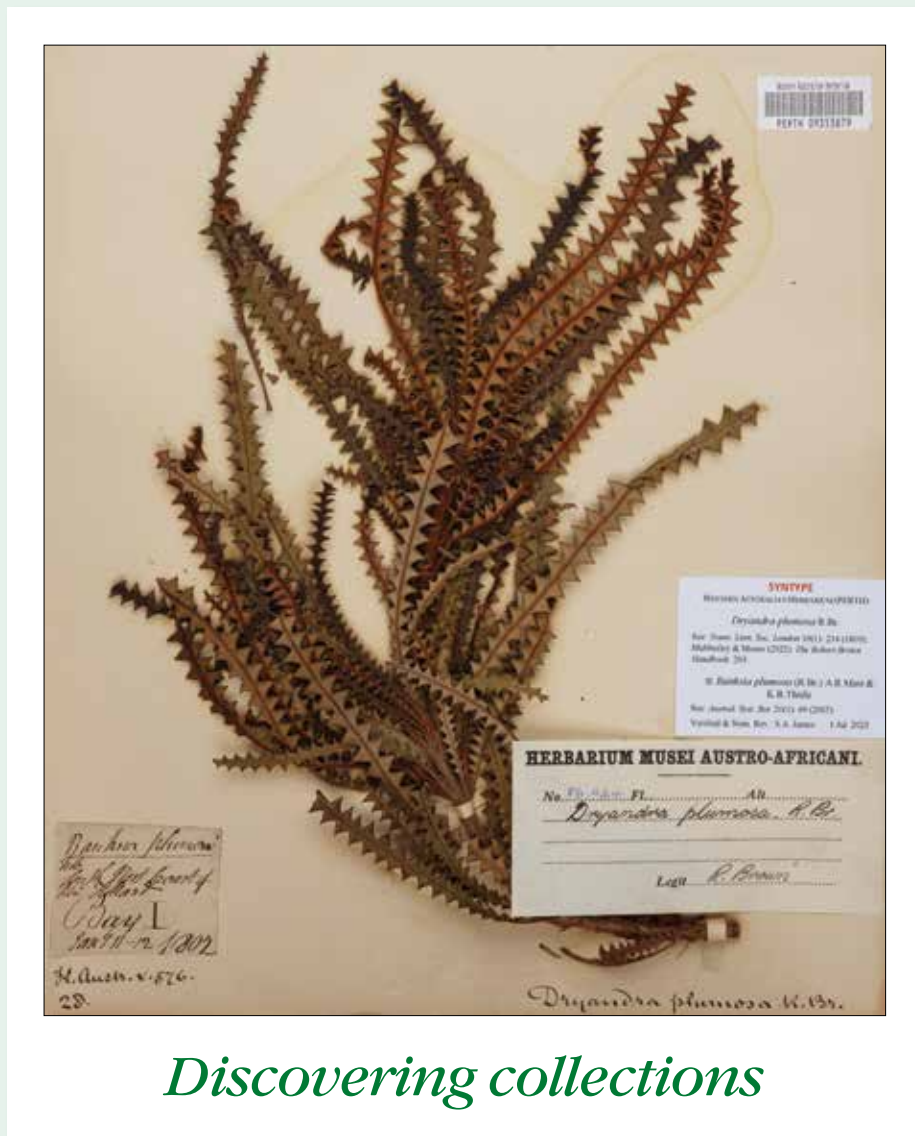


The Western Australian Herbarium, the State's official collection of dried plant specimens, is always a hive of activity, processing the 10,000 or so specimens that are added annually to the collection as fast as the staff can manage. Sometimes, however, we discover mystery boxes of specimens that have not yet been processed—specimens and data in the dark and not yet available for scientific research. This was the case for a recently 'discovered' series of specimens from across Australia dating from the early 1800s (collected by James Drummond, the first resident botanist in Western Australia who held the position of 'Government Naturalist' to 1868 (collected by Ferdinand von Mueller, Government Botanist in Victoria) that were repatriated to the Western Australian Herbarium from the Natural History Museum, London (38 specimens), Muséum National d'Histoire Naturelle, Paris (31 specimens), and the former South African Museum Herbarium.

In the South African Museum Herbarium boxes were more than 340 specimens collected by Robert Brown (1777–1858) between 1802 and 1805 when he travelled first as a "scientific gentlemen", accompanying Matthew Flinders on the historic Investigator voyage (1801-1803) to chart the coast of Australia, then collecting in Tasmania, Victoria and New South Wales before returning to Britain in 1805. Labelled *Iter Australiense*, these specimens are an important part of the more than 3,600 plant gatherings Brown made during his Australian expedition. These specimens were critical to the publication of Brown's *Prodromus florae Novae Hollandiae et Insulae Van-Diemen* (1810), documenting about 1,000 Australian plant species. Further study of the specimens has revealed more than 34 that were collected in Western Australia, and 58 that are type specimens—the specimens on which the description and name of a new species is based and, as such, the most important specimens as they unarguably represent the species.



Discovering collections

Unfortunately the specimens often have very little collecting information—typical of the era, but with further research and comparison with other Robert Brown collections, the collecting dates and locations may be able to be resolved.

All of these historical specimens have had their own journey of discovery. After being gathered in Australia in the 1800s, they returned to Britain to be studied by Robert Brown, Sir Joseph Banks and other notable botanists of the time. Around 1827, they were transferred to the Natural History Museum, London. As a duplicate (secondary) specimen set, they were transferred to the herbarium

of the Royal Botanic Garden, Edinburgh, eventually travelling across the globe once again in the late 19th Century to be deposited in the collections of the South African Museum Herbarium. In 2002, the specimens were again shipped across the Indian Ocean to be incorporated into the collections of the Western Australian Herbarium as exchange material, where they are available for further cultural and scientific research and study!

Above Robert Brown specimen of *Banksia plumosa* collected near Lucky Bay.
Photo – J. Percy-Bower