

History of Botany at Senckenberg

No other Senckenbergian discipline dates back so directly to Johann Christian Senckenberg (1707-1772) like botany. His original foundation comprised the citizen's hospital, an anatomical theatre, the Senckenbergian library and a botanical garden, where a "Stiftsbotanikus" was appointed as botanist and head gardener. Only few of Senckenberg's own plant collections are presently found in the Herbarium Senckenbergianum.

When the Senckenbergische Naturforschende Gesellschaft (SNG) was founded in 1817, one of the founding members of the society was Johannes Becker (1769-1833). He became the first curator for botany of the newly founded society. He was at the same time Stiftsbotanikus at the botanical garden and enriched the herbarium with many specimens from plants cultivated there. The main core of the Herbarium Senckenbergianum is built by his personal collection. A number of exotic collections were added to the herbarium from expeditions, e.g. those of J.R. & G. Forster to the Pacific, of Sieber to the Mediterranean and Martinique and of Ruppell to Abyssinia and Arabia. The latter collection was analysed and published by Becker's successor as curator of botany of the SNG, Georg Fresenius (1808-1866). He also published text books and many articles on several groups of phanerogams, but after 1845 increasingly focussed on studying microscopic algae and fungi. He also practiced as a medical doctor, taught botany (as "Stiftsphysicus" of the "Dr. Senckenbergische Stiftung"), and corresponded extensively with botanists worldwide. His personal herbarium was acquired in 1876 and contained a remarkably complete set of Rabenhorst's "Algen Europas". He was succeeded in 1867 by Theodor Geyler (1834-1889) who immediately started to rearrange the herbarium. In 1869, Adolf Metzler (1812-1883) also started to work in the herbarium. He intensively curated the cryptogams and in 1870 botany at Senckenberg was formally split into the Section of Phanerogams (headed by Geyler) and the Section of Cryptogams (headed by Metzler). Together they added considerable numbers of specimens to the collections and in 1870 a new "Botanical Hall" in the museum was opened to the public. After Metzler's death his personal lichen collection instantly made lichens a major strength of the Senckenberg herbarium. Geyler formally became Head of the Section of Fossil Plants in 1873 and after Metzler's death in 1883 also for the Section of Cryptogams.

When Frankfurt University was erected in 1914 as a private foundation of Frankfurt citizens, the SNG donated its botanical and zoological collections to form the biological department. At that time the curator of phanerogams of the SNG was Martin Möbius (1859-1946). He also became the first professor of botany of the university, thus also uniting the function of the "Stiftsphysicus" of the "Dr. Senckenbergische Stiftung" in his person. This institutionalized cooperation between SNG and university continued for approximately 30 years. In the course of time, however fields of research at the university and SNG diverged, leading up to the separation of the institutions again. In 1941, Richard Kräusel (1890-1966), who had worked as honorary research fellow since 1920 with the SNG, was appointed Head of the Department of Paleobotany at the SNG. In 1946 the herbarium collections were transferred back to the SNG, leading to the formation of the Department of Botany and Paleobotany at the SNG and thus continuing the long research tradition in these fields. In 1960 Hans Joachim Conert was employed as curator of botany and succeeded Kräusel 1966 as Head of the Department of Botany and Paleobotany. In 1962 Friedemann Schaarschmidt joined the SNG as curator of paleobotany and in 1966 Dieter Mollenhauer became curator of cryptogams.

In 1979, the Section for Plant Ecology and Soil Research (curator: Karsten Kühn), established in 1975, became part of the Department of Botany and Paleobotany.

With the retirement of H.J. Conert in 1994, an institutionalized cooperation with the J.W. Goethe University was re-established by jointly appointing Georg Zizka as both a professor of botany at the university and as Head of the Department of Botany and Paleobotany in 1995. Volker Wilde succeeded F. Schaarschmidt as curator of paleobotany in 1996. Stefan Dressler became curator of phanerogams II in 1997 and Christian Printzen curator of cryptogams in 2002.

In 2004, the Section of Paleobotany was transferred to the Department of Geology and Paleontology. In 2005, with generous support by the Grunelius and the Möllgaard foundations, the Grunelius-Möllgaard Laboratory for Molecular Evolution was established as part of the department, now named Department of Botany and Molecular Evolution.

A detailed survey on the department's history can be found in Blum 1901, Conert 1967, 1987.

Literature about the history of botany and paleobotany in Frankfurt

BLUM, I. 1901: Die Botanik in Frankfurt a.M., insbesondere ihre Pflege durch das Senckenbergianum. - Ber. Senckenb. Naturf. Ges. 1901: 3-38.

CONERT, H.J. 1967: Die Geschichte der Botanisch-Paläobotanischen Abteilung. - Senckenbergiana Biologica 48, Heft C: 1-57.

- 1987: Geschichte der Botanik im Naturmuseum und Forschungsinstitut Senckenberg. - Ber. Deutsch. Bot. Ges. 100: 193-214.

EGLER, K. & ROSENSTOCK, G. 1966: Die Geschichte der Botanik in Frankfurt am Main. Frankfurt a.M.

MÖBIUS, M. 1903: Geschichte und Beschreibung des Botanischen Gartens zu Frankfurt a.M. - Ber. Senckenb. Naturf. Ges. 1903: 117-152.

- 1921: Die Frankfurter Floristen. - Ber. Senckenb. Naturf. Ges. 51: 154-166.

ALBERTERNST, B., BUTTERFASS, TH., GRASMÜCK, H., LANGE-BERTALOT, H., PRINZINGER, R., TROMMER, G., WESSEL, M., WILTSCHKO, W., WINTER, CH., WITTIG, R. & ZIZKA, G. (2005): Der Botanische Garten der J.W. Goethe-Universität Frankfurt am Main: Ein illustrierter Führer.— 99 S.; Norderstedt (Verlag Books on Demand).

A compilation of the most important collectors and collections held at the Herbarium Senckenbergianum was published in „Courier Forschungsinstitut Senckenberg“ vol. 217.

S. Dressler/ G.Zizka 2005