Christmas gifts in the Herbarium
by Herbarium Curator Alan Weakley

As I write this in November, here in the Herbarium we feel the spirit of Christmas. Dozens of boxes with unknown treasures were delivered to the Herbarium in October. Although the packages were wrapped in plain brown paper, there was a Christmas-like air of expectation to see what treasures (or dross!) we had received.

Several months ago, the herbarium curator at Dartmouth College called. They had made a decision to “downsize” and wanted to know if we would be interested in receiving (and caring for in perpetuity!) the southeastern United States specimens in their herbarium. After some discussions and negotiations, we agreed, and lo, a few weeks later 30 large boxes arrived, estimated to include 5000-10,000 plant specimens.

The process of unpacking these boxes will be a methodical one, as appropriate curation involves freezing the specimens to kill pests, careful unpacking, annotating to confirm or correct identifications, databasing specimen data, making decisions about what to do with any duplicate specimens, repairing specimens in poor condition, and, finally, filing in the main collection.

As of this date, we have opened two boxes so far. One of the first specimens to emerge was an 1844 collection made by the Rev. Moses Ashley Curtis of Appalachian false goat’s-beard (Astilbe biternata). One of the most eminent and influential of 19th century botanists in North Carolina, Rev. Curtis was an Episcopal priest who lived in various Carolina locations, including Wilmington, Raleigh, Lincolnton, and Hillsborough, North Carolina, and Society Hill, South Carolina. He corresponded regularly with Asa Gray and others of the North American botanical elite, and was responsible for the discovery and naming of many North Carolina plants.

Other historic collections have emerged from the Dartmouth specimens: Biltmore Herbarium sheets from the 1890s and 1900s; specimens collected by Henry George Jesup in 1841, Robert Bebb in the 1860s, George Engelmann in the 1870s, George Vasey in the 1880s, W.W. Eggleston and E.S. Steele in the 1890s; and other specimens collected by well-known botanists. Particularly interesting is an undated sheet of southern leatherflower (Clematis crispa), collected by Charles Wilkins Short (1794-1862), whose botanical career was commemorated in the name of the genus Shortia.

One of the two opened boxes represents material collected in the District of Columbia. The great bulk of the DC specimens were from the 1890s and before, and the label data provides something of a “time capsule” view of our Capitol over a century ago: flax (Linum usitatissimum), collected from a “cultivated field, Washington, D.C.”; blazing-star (Liatris graminifolia) from “rough pasture land”; weeds from “the Hygienic Ice Factory”; and clasping aster (Symphyotrichum patens) from “dry rocky banks, Georgetown, D.C.” Other kinds of banks are probably there now!

Other North Carolina material includes a set of specimens from Melanie Ripperton Chapman, all collected in Chatham County, North Carolina, in the 1960s and 1970s, including new records for the county.

We are delighted to welcome these specimens to the University of North Carolina Herbarium — no lump of coal, this! Whether from the 1850s or the 1990s, these specimens will add to the value of our collection. We treasure both the old and the new, since comparing the two enables us to see the changes that have occurred to the land.