Tropical flotsam and jetsam
by Herbarium Curator Alan Weakley

North Carolina’s location gives it a humid, warm temperate climate, and the Piedmont and Coastal Plain are sometimes considered subtropical (an idea that seems particularly credible after the long, hot summer of 2002!). On the coast, the great capes (Cape Fear, Cape Lookout and Cape Hatteras) jut out into the warm waters of the Gulf Stream (whose gyring eddies have formed them), further moderating the climate, while also exposing them to high likelihood of hurricanes and other storms. The subtropical nature of tidewater North Carolina is highlighted by plants that grow there, such as the cabbage palm (*Sabal palmetto*), which reaches the northern limit of its natural distribution in southeastern North Carolina.

A few weeks ago, I had occasion to think about the “tropicalness” of North Carolina. I had received an e-mail from Matt Windsor, a ranger at Fort Macon State Park, asking if the digital photograph which he had attached was of beach morning-glory (*Ipomoea pes-caprae*) — and indeed it was!

Beach Morning-glory is a distinctive and rather outlandish-looking plant, familiar to many North Americans who have vacationed on tropical beaches of Florida, Hawaii, or more foreign locations. It is a conspicuous vine of shores of southern North America, Central America, South America, Africa, India, Asia, Australia and Polynesia. Its thick, reddish stems trail off along the beach for distances of 100 feet or more, with glossy green leaves at intervals of a foot or so, and a scattering of large purple flowers.

Through the 1800s and early 1900s, *Ipomoea pes-caprae* had not been found north of Georgia along the Atlantic coast, but it was found in South Carolina in 1947, and now in North Carolina. Is this a sign of global warming? Will we soon live in a tropical jungle? Did beach morning-glory arrive here opportunistically, transported by humans, on a beach blanket or aboard an RV from Miami Beach? Or did it arrive via natural means, by water or wind?

Beach morning-glory has seeds which float in sea water. They are picked up by high tides on one beach and may be deposited on another beach miles away. The plant is famous as a long-distance disperser and was one of the first plants to colonize the new volcanic island of Anak Krakatau (near Indonesia) after its creation in the violent volcanic eruption of 1883. Matt Windsor writes, “We had a storm in May at Fort Macon that brought up big rafts of sargassum complete with all sorts of drift seeds — sea beans, monkey pod seeds, mangrove seedlings, and turtle grass. Maybe that’s when our visitor showed up.”

Only time will tell whether *Ipomoea pes-caprae* has successfully colonized North Carolina and is now an established part of the flora of our state, or whether its appearance is just a temporary incident. At the University of North Carolina Herbarium, we have documented that *Ipomoea pes-caprae* appeared at Fort Macon in the Summer of 2002. That documentation consists of the traditional herbarium specimen and more modern media — a digital photo and e-mail descriptions of the find. This species will now be included in new floras covering our area, as a plant that the beach-going botanist may encounter in North Carolina. Over the coming decades, as *I. pes-caprae* reappears (or not!), we will know more what to make of 2002’s “state record.”

One might think that everything botanical is known about North Carolina, where botanists have been studying the flora for several centuries. But frequently someone contacts the herbarium about a puzzling plant, and these inquiries often lead to interesting stories . . . including this one about some tropical jetsam that has shown up on the coast of the “old North State.”