

Though small in size, Delaware is rich in natural treasures – from coastal beaches and dunes to freshwater wetlands and upland forests, the First State harbors a bounty of plant life that is worth preserving. Our landscape has undergone many changes in the centuries since Europeans first arrived. Forests that once dominated the landscape were cleared for agriculture and timber production. Although some abandoned farms and logging operations have reverted back to forest in some areas, gone are the majestic old growth forests described by generations past. Today the transformation of our land is occurring at a rate like no other period in history. Much of the state's soil is being rapidly covered with pavement and buildings, leaving less space for habitats to rebound and native plant assemblages to reappear. While these unprecedented changes in our landscape should be cause for concern, better tools for guiding efforts to protect, preserve and restore our trees, shrubs, wildflowers, grasses, sedges and vines will help us revive the vegetation that defines Delaware's landscape and our natural heritage.

*The Flora of Delaware* was designed to serve that purpose – it is a reference book containing basic information on the status, habitat, and physiographic distribution of plants in Delaware. One might say that it has been nearly 200 years in the making. Pioneer botanists roamed Delaware in the early 1800s collecting and cataloguing plant specimens from the once wild and isolated areas of the state. Today, modern botanists continue searching fields and forests documenting the species that grow here – and noting those that have disappeared. For the first time, this list of species, and a wealth of information about each, is available to planners, wildlife and land managers, stewardship ecologists, restoration ecologists, research biologists, landscapers, naturalists, educators, and gardeners to name a few. It will serve as a reference for generations to come – bringing together information that will provide answers to the questions most commonly posed about plant life in our state.

### **Botanical Exploration of Delaware: A Brief History**

A comprehensive book listing the flora of Delaware would be incomplete without a brief history of the state's botanical exploration, for it is these beginnings centuries ago that allow us to comment on the status of our flora today. Writings of early botanical explorers provide us with a glimpse of the landscape during centuries long past. As early as 1804, the European naturalist C. S. Rafinesque (1783-1840) explored the state from north to south, traveling 300 miles on foot and relying upon the hospitality of strangers to provide lodging. Along the way, Rafinesque explored and wrote about his travels to Cape Henlopen and the area today known as the Great Cypress Swamp (Tucker & Dill 1989). While many of his specimens were lost at sea, great care was taken by Tucker and Dill (1989) to reconstruct his flora of Delaware from letters and journal entries. Not long after Rafinesque, the English botanist Thomas Nuttall (1786-1859) also explored the environs of Cape Henlopen and the Great Cypress Swamp in the year 1809. He, too, kept meticulous notes on the plants he observed and collected specimens that were eventually deposited in the Academy of Natural Sciences in Philadelphia (Tatnall 1938).

As the 19<sup>th</sup> century gave way to the 20<sup>th</sup> century, botanists Albert Commons (1828-1919) and William Canby (1831-1904), both from the Wilmington area of Delaware, were exploring and collecting plants from much of the state. As noted in the dedication above, Commons in particular made a significant contribution to our knowledge of Delaware's flora. Canby was well known not only for his work in Delaware, but also for botanical explorations which took him to western parts of the U.S. He discovered several new species of plants, many of which were named for him in honor of his discoveries. In 1867, Canby discovered a new species of *Oxypolis* from the Ellendale area of Sussex County. The species was later described and named *Oxypolis canbyi* (Coulter and Rose) Fern. in his honor (Fernald 1939; Tucker et al. 1983). Today, *O. canbyi* (Canby's dropwort) is extremely rare in North America and is listed as Endangered by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Sadly, the Ellendale locale has been destroyed and the species is now thought to be extirpated from Delaware.