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AT 88, MARY LINDA SMYTH MAKES HERBARIUM A GIVING AND GATHERING PLACE

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BLACKSBURG - While most of us have grown up believing retirement is mandatory at age 65, here's Mary Linda Smyth working away at Virginia Tech's herbarium at the age of "almost 88."

Three mornings a week, Smyth does something she's good at and loves doing. People around the world benefit from her work.

The herbarium houses samples of all kinds of green plants as well as herbs, Smyth said. Many people think it's limited to commonly known herbs: peppermint, basil, mustard and such.

It's the ideal place for capturing her experience.

In 50-plus years, Smyth has taught at colleges and universities, including Radford University and Virginia Tech.

She's been with Tech for 30 years and was an associate professor as well as essentially the acting curator of the herbarium.

Smyth never knows what the workday will bring. A wide range of projects transpires in the large room, which smells faintly of the mothballs that are used in its storage vaults.

She may be holding a delicate frond, covered with glue, when the phone rings. If no one else is there she must decide: frond, phone, or both? It's both.

"Anything that turns up, I do," she said.

She works six hours each week. That might make her Virginia's oldest state employee, but the personnel office in Richmond couldn't confirm that.

A herbarium is a busy place. Virginia Tech's houses more than 86,000 plant specimens. Smyth is familiar with their Latin names, and "you wouldn't know the name if you didn't know something about its properties," such as its healing potential. "That's the way you classify them, by the properties."

Plants arrive needing to be identified, a process that can take days of research.

Plant specimens, looking as though they've been removed from a poetry book after being pressed under the weight of encyclopedias, need to be mounted, labeled, numbered and filed.

A global scientific language is used to organize plants; the numbers mean the same thing from country to country. Smyth sees plants from Japan, Europe and remote islands, as well as the many found throughout Virginia.

She often has helped newcomers to the area. Smyth has taken people into the woods for on-the-spot lessons.

One recent morning she was mounting dry, flat plant specimens. She moved with the grace of an artist, placing the dried ferns on special herbarium paper, using special herbarium glue.

In her lifetime, Smyth has collected 6,000 plants from Canada, the United States and Mexico. More than 600 were collected from the property she and her husband, Ellison, former pastor of Blacksburg Presbyterian Church, own in Blacksburg.

She says it's not an impressive collection.

"Look at this number here. Ninety-eight thousand some."

It's the identifying number on a plant given by a man who had collected a sample for each of its preceding numbers.

The first of her 6,000 collected items came during her college years at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill, where she received a master's degree in botany and taxonomy in 1930.

Smyth still was doing graduate studies, working toward her doctorate, when she met her husband-to-be, a Blacksburg native. She collected plants; he collected butterflies.

It seems a perfect match.

Seven years ago they celebrated their golden wedding anniversary with their four children.