ALAN WEAKLEY, HONOREE

This year we offer a special tribute to Alan Weakley, who for many years has made significant contributions to the study, understanding, appreciation and conservation of the Southeast’s distinctive native flora and its habitats.

“What do you say about the contributions of one of the most gifted botanists of our time, someone who knows and continues to refine the taxonomic tapestry of thousands of vascular (and non-vascular) plants of the Southeast, who through his work has helped protect thousands of acres of critically important lands, and who has unhesitatingly shared his deep passion and insights into our remarkable flora with so many? One thing you can call him is one in a million and a godsend to those who share his passion and even perhaps more importantly to those that don’t. It is through his work and the others he inspires that we may hope to ultimately decipher the complexities of our regional flora and conserve it for future generations. We all look forward to Alan continuing this incredibly important work for many years and to see what he does next.”
—Latimore Smith of Southern Wild, formerly of The Nature Conservancy in Louisiana

CHILDHOOD

Alan Weakley was born in 1957 in Silver Spring in Maryland, but spent his childhood in North Springfield, Virginia. His parents were William Vanner Weakley (1931-1977) and Jean Annette Hensley (1925- ), both from the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia. Alan’s father, Bill Weakley, grew up in Pine Grove, Page County, Virginia, on the western slope of the Blue Ridge Mountains, less than a
mile from Shenandoah National Park and in the shadow of Tanners Ridge, Hawksbill Mountain, and Big Meadows, and a few miles across the Blue Ridge from Weakley Hollow. He was interested in writing (particularly modern novels), music (classical, jazz, and blues), camping, and fishing. Alan's mother, Jean (Hensley) Weakley, grew up in the countryside near Elkton, Rockingham County, Virginia, near the lower end of Hensley Hollow, also just west of current Shenandoah National Park. She has interests in natural history, literature (especially poetry), politics, and conservation. Alan's extended family and ancestry in Virginia is a rural one, nearly all farmers and tradespeople. Alan and his older brother, Douglas (a mathematics professor at Purdue University at Fort Wayne, Indiana) were the first in their family to attend college.

Growing up, Alan was interested in lots of things—often deeply and passionately so, devouring a subject and then moving on to another (while never completely abandoning his previous interests): dinosaurs, classical music (from medieval to modern), geology, birds, Tolkien, Dickens, Twain, Cabell, archaeology, Wagnerian opera, Frisbee, science fiction and fantasy, limnology, photography, Celtic and Norse mythology, French horn, sockii (an invented team game played with a wooden puck kicked towards a goal)—the list went on...

A primary theme of his childhood was time outdoors. It was a different era (not "Last Child in the Woods"), no one worried about unsupervised kid time, and when Alan got home from school, his mother would order him to get out of the house and not come back until dinner. Mostly, he explored the forests and streams nearby. The creek near their home, Backlick Run (always known to him and his family simply as "The Creek"), was explored for miles, sometimes with friends (playing hide-and-seek and "war") but usually alone, and every feature of it was known to him in detail. A few miles away, a county park, Lake Accotink, provided more diversity, and for years Alan would bicycle to the park in the pre-dawn dark every Sunday morning and explore, birdwatch, and botanize for the morning. If the water was high, access to the natural areas involved crossing a railroad trestle, scary but worthwhile.

Family vacations were always oriented toward nature or the outdoors. Many involved going to the coast in Delaware, Maryland, Virginia, or North Carolina and doing natural history exploring, crabbing, and fishing, but most vacation and weekend trips were back to the Shenandoah Valley to stay with family and also explore. Starting when Alan was 5 or 6, his Aunt Eleanor (Hensley) Hummel bought a tract of "mountain land" in Frederick County, Virginia, and his family spent at least a month there every year afterward, weeks of vacation and weekends throughout the year, building rock gardens, picking blueberries, foraying out to roadsides and parks nearby, going down to the Lower Pond before dusk to sit quietly as a family for 30 minutes on logs, waiting for the beavers to come out.

**BOTANY, COMPARATIVE LITERATURE, AND MUSIC at UNC-CHAPEL HILL (1974-1978)**

Alan went to undergraduate school at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill from 1974 to 1978. Initially thinking he might major in Music, Anthropology, English, Botany, Zoology, or Geology, he quickly fell into a "crowd" of Botany majors while taking an Environmental Geology class his first year, and after taking Local Flora from Dr. Jimmy Massey it was pretty clear that Botany would be a major field of study for Alan. Ultimately, he continued his diverse interests, double majoring in Botany and Comparative Literature, but earning more credit hours playing
music (Orchestra, Early Music Ensemble, Jazz Band, Brass Quintet) than in either major. He also worked at the North Carolina Botanical Garden as an intern in 1977-1978.

During his undergraduate studies, he engaged with a variety of memorable teachers and mentors: Al Radford and Jim Massey (botany), Doris Betts (creative writing), Father James Devereux (Shakespeare), Kenneth Reckford (Greek and Roman classics), Diane Hinkle (Virginia Woolf, Marcel Proust, James Joyce), Boris Rybka (French horn), and Alfred Engstrom (Dante). The memory of these relationships, the one-on-one personal interaction with a mentor who did more than simply teach a course but with whom a student developed something of a personal relationship, serves as an important inspiration for Alan as he fills a “professorial role” at UNC since 2002.

Albert E. Radford, first author of the Manual of the Vascular Flora of the Carolinas (1968) and developer of “ecosystematics” and conservation-oriented field assessment methods (what we might nowadays call “biodiversity inventory methodologies”) served as a major mentor and intellectual influence. “Big Al” believed deeply that understanding plants, ecological communities, and their conservation needs depended on a holistic understanding of the interactions of species and their habitats (geology, soils, climate, location), and he described this methodology in a book, Natural Heritage: Classification, Inventory, and Information, published in 1981, with Alan’s senior thesis included as a section. Alan took Plant Systematics and Ecosystematics with Dr. Radford, served as a Teaching Assistant for Ecosystematics while still an undergraduate, did an honors thesis on the Swift Creek Swamp Forest in Edgecombe County, NC, under Dr. Radford’s supervision, and worked (with Jimmy Dickerson) on a Land Ecological Classification Project for the Dan River Basin in NC and VA under Dr. Radford’s supervision—what we might describe now as a prototype geographic/landscape assessment of ecological priorities, at the very primitive beginning of remote sensing, GIS, and landscape analysis.

CONSERVATION SURVEYS FOR TNC AND NC NHP (1977-present)

Dr. Radford also provided Alan with an entrance to the conservation world. Through his status as a preeminent expert on the flora of the Carolinas and the Southeast, and his role as a National Park Service contractor on the National Natural Landmarks Program, Dr. Radford was an acknowledged expert on conservation priorities in North Carolina and the rest of the southeastern United States, at the time that the conservation movement became empowered intellectually, ethically, and legally in the 1970s. In North Carolina, Radford became one of the primary experts advising conservation priorities to the newly established chapter of The Nature Conservancy in North Carolina. He recommended Alan to The Nature Conservancy to conduct inventory/master plans for lands recently acquired at Bluff Mountain (Ashe County, NC) and Big Yellow Mountain (Avery County, NC), and Alan worked on these projects from 1977 to 1980, producing lengthy reports for each of these highly significant natural areas. This relationship with The Nature Conservancy has served as an ongoing central professional and conservation role in Alan’s life and career, continuing through additional contractual work, volunteer work resulting in awards, a full-time role at regional and national levels with TNC (1994-1999), and continuing volunteer advisory and donor relations roles to the present day.

ENVIRONMENTAL CONSULTANT (1978-1980)
Upon graduating from UNC-Chapel Hill in December 1978, Alan was hired by Coastal Zone Resources, Inc., based in Wilmington, NC. As an environmental consultant, Alan conducted surveys of lands slated both for development and for conservation (notably the Big South Fork National River and Recreation Area) and gained experience across the southeastern United States surveying for rare species, delineating and mapping natural communities, developing management plans, and, in the process, visiting a diversity of natural communities in KY, TN, TX, FL, NC, SC, and other southeastern states. While gaining a lot of professional experience about report writing and map production, Alan also was able to learn a great deal about the botany, ecology, natural communities, and culture of other parts of the southeastern United States. Alan also continued to do contracted “natural area inventory” work for The Nature Conservancy in North Carolina and Tennessee, as well as surveys for the N.C. Natural Heritage Program.

MUSICIAN (1978-1994)

Alan played Principal or 2nd Horn in various orchestras during this period: UNC Symphony, Wilmington Symphony, Durham Symphony, and Raleigh Symphony, as well as regular “gigging” at local events and churches, and with the North Carolina Symphony. He also was a founding member of the Durham Early Brass Ensemble, which played recitals around the Triangle area and accompanied choral groups performing Renaissance to Early Baroque pieces.

DUKE BOTANY GRADUATE SCHOOL (1980-1984)

In Fall of 1980, Alan headed to Duke in pursuit of a PhD in Botany. Norm Christensen was his advisor, and a fellow first-year graduate student was Mike Schafale (later a colleague in the North Carolina Natural Heritage Program). Alan took courses on mosses (Lewis Anderson) and lichens (Bill and Chicita Culberson), a revelational experience in looking at other organism groups. Alan's dissertation topic at this time focused on the taxonomic, evolutionary, and ecological relationships of allotetraploid daughter species of spleenworts (Asplenium) to their diploid parents, which engaged Alan’s intersecting interests in geology, soils, taxonomy, and ecology.

However, in 1984, the lure of a full-time job as the North Carolina Natural Heritage Program's State Ecologist (overseeing natural area inventory projects) tempted Alan to leave proved Duke while still "A.B.D." ("All But Dissertation"). Although Alan left Duke with ambitious plans and hopes to complete his dissertation research on Asplenium, he returned to Duke to complete his PhD much later, in 2003, with a much more ambitious research project that would become the cornerstone of his ongoing life’s work.

NORTH CAROLINA NATURAL HERITAGE PROGRAM (1984-1994)

At the North Carolina Natural Heritage Program, Alan settled into working for one of the most effective natural heritage programs in the country-wide network. A small program with very strong field-work skills, the program was also infused by its Coordinator, Chuck Roe, and Protection Specialist, Julie Moore, with a strongly felt mission not just to do great inventory, but to synthesize the data into protection plans and then to aggressively “shop” those plans to agencies and organizations best able to carry them out: TNC, local land trusts (just forming at the time), federal agencies like the US Forest Service, National Park Service, US Fish and Wildlife Service, and
Department of Defense, and state agencies, including the Plant Conservation Program, Wildlife Resources Commission, Department of Transportation, and Department of Cultural Resources. Mike Schafale (Alan’s former officemate at Duke) and Alan collaborated on several “approximations” of a Natural Community Classification for North Carolina and also began the process of working with regional and national TNC ecologists to knit together a regional and national community classification that would support conservation planning. About half-way through Alan’s tenure with the Program, the Program’s Botanist, Laura Mansberg Cotterman, wanted to reduce her hours and become the Data Manager, while the Data Manager, Mike Schafale, wanted to become the Ecologist, and a three-way job swap was arranged, whereby Alan switched positions from Ecologist to Botanist.

“When I applied for the North Carolina Natural Heritage Program position, Alan gave me a take-home exam that took two full days to complete. It contained questions like “What natural communities would you expect to find on Muckalee loam?” and “Do you think Solidago pulchra is a valid species? If so, why?” I still feel I should have gotten a degree for successfully completing it.

“In those first years, every spring I literally had nightmares about identifying pre-flowering shrubs, and told Alan I was counting that as work time. “No, you’re not,” he said. “In my opinion, the best jobs in our profession are the field surveys. But those are entry-level, and career advancement happens mostly indoors. For Alan, those rare field days were like stolen time. It didn’t matter if it was raining rivers; he would be out in it.

“Few botanists in our history have had the breadth of field knowledge and taxonomic skill as Alan. He ranks with the best: Small, Fernald, Godfrey, Radford. During my work on the outer coastal plain, I found a strange goldenrod that didn’t key to anything. I showed it to Alan, and he said that he had seen something like it in the NC State herbarium. There I found two specimens of the same plant that had been collected by Godfrey in 1949 and 1950 from the same region and misidentified by Cronquist as something that grows in Iowa. It turned out to be a new species.”—Richard LeBlond, retired NC NHP

“Alan and I first began corresponding in the early 1980s, when he was with the North Carolina Natural Heritage Program and I was with the Massachusetts Natural Heritage Program. I would ask about the distribution and abundance of certain Coastal Plain plants, ones that in MA were at their northern range limit. I wanted to know how rare these plants were in the heart of their range (NC) and elsewhere if possible. Turns out Alan was interested in how those same plants were faring up our way. We soon learned that we both had independently been making hand-drawn distribution maps, derived from literature records and specimens seen. After I moved to NC in 1991, these maps mushroomed into the hundreds as we were determined to produce maps that were accurate and that corrected many historical errors. Due to the overwhelming botanical diversity of the Southeast, we concentrated on Coastal Plain endemics. Our joint paper on Coastal Plain Endemics: Phytogeographic Patterns (2002) is still today our most-cited work!

“From simply mapping species it became necessary to also map varieties or subspecies. This involved a tremendous amount of herbarium work, examining and annotating specimens; but the effort was repaid many times over. Hundreds of varieties, whether recognized or forgotten by authors, were evaluated and led to publication of many taxonomic papers—by us and numerous colleagues that Alan has inspired. More recently, Alan has gone beyond to evaluate higher level taxonomy—genus and family—as part of the current wave of DNA biology. As a result, we now have a far greater
understanding than ever before of the diversity and subtleties of the southeastern flora.” —Bruce Sorrie, retired NC NHP

“I think I first met Alan at a Southeastern Regional Heritage Program meeting in the early 1980s, but I first got a chance to talk with him while on a field trip connected with a Big Thicket conference in Texas, where we both spoke sometime in the 1990s. I was very impressed with his combined skills of field botany and plant community ecology. I regard Alan as the premier plant taxonomist in the Southeast and in the very top tier of plant ecologists, field botanists, and biogeographers in the region. We tend to think alike, which could be bad or good depending on the circumstances..." —Reed Noss, Florida Institute for Conservation Science

“As Botanist for the NC Natural Heritage Program, Alan provided strong leadership to program staff, to partner agencies, and to the conservation community at large. Alan's talent for conveying the importance of conservation and rare species protection to landowners is built on his extensive field experience and his ability to integrate aspects of a broad range of disciplines, including geology, soil science, natural community structure, species specific ecology and land use history. Alan continues to influence land conservation in North Carolina, leaving a legacy that will last generations.”

—Linda Pearsall, retired Director of NC NHP

CAROLINA VEGETATION SURVEY (1988-present)

In 1988, a group of ecologists organized the Carolina Vegetation Survey (CVS), to rigorously gather consistent vegetation plot data, use that data to classify the vegetation using quantitative methods, and set up permanent plots that could be used for ongoing vegetation monitoring and management. The four core members of the collaboration who have remained active in CVS over the last 31 years are Bob Peet (UNC-Chapel Hill), Tom Wentworth (NC State University), Mike Schafale (NC Natural Heritage Program), and Alan. Starting in 1988 and continuing to 2015, CVS organized annual “Pulses”—week-long field excursions to collect scientific data on high-quality, relatively intact vegetation across the Carolinas, with 1200 people participating over a 28-year period. These events (variously called Bootcamp for Botanists, Botanical Woodstock, and Extreme Botany) were an early example of “citizen science”, involving as many as 40 participants per day, and became major collegial, mentoring, scientific, and learning experiences for the professional and non-professional botanical and ecological communities of the Carolinas.

“I can’t think of anyone else who has ever contributed so profoundly to TWO realms of systematics in the southeastern US, those related to BOTH flora AND vegetation. Alan is, of course, well known for his synthetic treatments of flora that effectively span the southeastern United States, an incredibly biodiverse region. Yet, at the same time, Alan has also played a central role in vegetation inventory and classification in the same region, beginning with his collaboration with Michael Schafale (at the North Carolina Natural Heritage Program) on The Natural Communities of North Carolina, Third Approximation, followed by his work for NatureServe in developing the US National Vegetation Classification, his long-term collaboration on the Carolina Vegetation Survey, and continuing today with his service on the Vegetation Classification Panel of the Ecological Society of America.” —Tom Wentworth, retired NC State University
“Alan Weakley, more than any other contemporary scientist, has broadened our understanding of the biodiversity of the southeastern United States, and at the same time has set new standards for how such information should be compiled and presented. He was coauthor of the first compilation of natural ecosystems of North Carolina, a leading figure in the initial compilation of the US National Vegetation Classification, and he continues as a regional editor for this critical conservation tool. He is author of the first comprehensive flora for the Southeast since J.K. Small’s flora nearly a century ago, and this work stands out among floristic treatments worldwide in its rapid incorporation of changing taxonomic understanding and in its embrace of taxon concepts as key to integrating biodiversity information from diverse sources.”—Robert Peet, retired UNC-Chapel Hill

FLORA OF THE SOUTHEAST (1991-present)

In his role as State Botanist at the Natural Heritage Program in the early 1990s, Alan began work on a new flora for the state. This began with the need to empower program biologists and as many as 40 contracted biologists conducting county inventories and rare plant surveys with the means to identify rare plant taxa that were not covered in the Manual of the Vascular Flora of the Carolinas (Radford, Ahles, and Bell 1968)—either because the species had not yet been described, were not differentiated in that flora, or had been newly discovered to occur in the Carolinas since the writing of that book. Beginning with individual keys for species in genera with significant changes, Alan started compiling his work into a “Flora,” and soon demand for his flora created pressure for a more comprehensive and truly “new” flora that covered additional areas of the southeast beyond the Carolinas. In 1994, when Alan was hired into a regional job at TNC, it seemed natural to sequentially expand the project to additional southeastern States. Alan’s Flora of the Unglaciated Southeastern United States (the “Weakley Flora”) now covers the unglaciated southeastern United States east of the dry plains. The “Weakley Flora” has become the standard used across the region because of its current taxonomy, excellent keys and maps, and links to other floras and literature.

“I was a young upstart when I first contacted Alan maybe 15+ years ago (shock and horror), as a heritage botanist working in Maryland. It was intimidating to reach out to him with comments on one of his early drafts of “the Flora” but he was always approachable, kind, and very appreciative when errors were brought to his attention. This disposition is not necessarily what you’d expect from someone in Alan’s position. What I’ve found most refreshing, now that I’ve known him for over a decade, have been in the field with him numerous times, and have even been hosted by him and Julie for a night or two at their place, is his lack of ego. It is refreshing in a field where people can take themselves and what they’ve learned way too seriously. His lack of ego helps set the tone and example for collaboration and community here in the Southeast.”—Wesley Knapp, NC NHP, formerly MD NHP

“I believe Alan Weakley is the most influential botanist in the southeastern United States. His ongoing work on the Flora of the Southern and Mid-Atlantic States is a masterpiece and THE standard for our region. I first started utilizing his treatment back in 2002 and have looked forward to every update since then. Our knowledge and understanding of our flora is so much greater because of his tremendous dedication. Alan is a botanical giant and we see much further when we stand on his shoulders!”—Dan Spaulding, Curator at Anniston Museum of Natural History

“There are times, when even though you may not truly know a person well, you think of them often ... maybe as a mentor, teacher, colleague, or friend. What Alan is doing is something everyone
admires and values...whether publicly or not. I am grateful to have met him, for his time, honest words and critiques ... for simply being a botanical friend and sharing soul.

“In a world where most botanists are content to combat “plant blindness”, Alan aims to alleviate “plant species blindness”. The Flora he is compiling has already replaced the actionable term of “I used the R.A.B.” in most southeastern botanists’ vocabulary with the affectionately coined phrase of “I used Weakley” for the I.D. And for it, we are truly grateful. One of the ‘Bama Boys (as he has dubbed us)”—Wayne Barger, Biologist, State Lands Division, Natural Heritage Section, Department of Conservation and Natural Resources

“It would be difficult to say enough about how much Alan has contributed to our knowledge of botany and ecology, and has translated much of this knowledge into useful efforts to conserve rare species and natural areas. One of the great characteristics that is an integral part of Alan and has helped him in his efforts is his people skills. If you have ever worked with Alan on any endeavor, you quickly learn how smart he is, how well he listens to your input, and how passionate he is about protecting our natural heritage and improving knowledge about the flora of the Southeast. If you had to attempt to point to one outstanding achievement that has influenced hundreds of botanists and conservation-minded people, it would have to be his lifelong effort in compiling the Flora of the Southern and Mid-Atlantic States. No other human I know would have the gumption, skills, or tenacity to take on such work. And if you are going to undertake conserving rare elements, how can this happen without knowing what those elements are? For many of us who are primarily field botanists and do not have easy access to literature, and perhaps may even be either lazy or lacking the critical skills needed to review and keep up with taxonomic publications, Alan provides the most useful gift of all: free access to a wealth of knowledge on the flora of the Southeast. Throughout my career as an independent contractor, conducting botanical inventories and working on vegetation mapping projects throughout the Southeast, the most useful and valuable tool that I rely on, and the one that has served me best, has been Alan’s Flora. It is high time that Alan receives recognition and gratitude for all of his efforts.” —Tom Govus, Consulting Biologist

“I once asked Alan what was better in the field, his manual, ‘the Weakley’, or him, Alan Weakley, in person. He looked at me incredulously, exclaiming with a smirk, ‘Why do you think I wrote the manual? Do you think I can remember all those species?’—although in his case, I’m not sure that’s not true.” —Gary Kauffman, US Forest Service

“I’ve known Alan for over 25 years and have long marveled at his genuine ability to multi-task. For example—I was once sitting with Alan at a meeting where he was simultaneously preparing the talk he was to give in just a few minutes, playing online Words With Friends and Scrabble, while writing the key to Symphyotrichum for the Flora of the Southeast.” —Johnny Randall, Director of Conservation, North Carolina Botanical Garden

“Alan has made unparalleled contributions to southeastern plant biodiversity recognition, discovery, and conservation through his growing synthesis of the flora and taxonomic research. This work has been made freely available, enabling community-wide efforts to protect the natural world we all love. This legacy, coupled with his dedicated role as a teacher, continues to amaze us all, and engender the next generation of proficient botanists and taxonomists.

“Due to scope creep, I lovingly refer to his flora as ‘The Flora of the Universe’.” —Derick Poindexter, UNC-CH Biology Department PhD candidate
SENIOR REGIONAL ECOLOGIST FOR THE NATURE CONSERVANCY (1994-1999)

In 1994, Alan was hired as the Southeastern Senior Regional Ecologist by The Nature Conservancy, with responsibility for North Carolina, South Carolina, Florida, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, Texas, Oklahoma, Arkansas, Kentucky, Tennessee, and Puerto Rico. His primary designated roles were 1) to develop the National Vegetation Classification, working with Natural Heritage Programs in the 12-state region as well as with federal agencies interested in using the classification, especially the US Forest Service and the National Park Service; 2) to engage with TNC’s state chapters in preparing ecoregional plans for all ecoregions in the Southeast; and 3) to continue to develop and teach “Heritage Methodology”—the means for the Natural Heritage Network to inventory natural areas, record and curate biological and ecological data, and provide conservation data to conservation practitioners. This role enabled him to “keep the learning curve steep” by extending his knowledge and exploration of the natural communities and flora of the Southeast.

CHIEF ECOLOGIST, TNC/NATURESERVE (1999-2002)

With various transitions at The Nature Conservancy, including the promotion of Alan's boss, Chief Ecologist Denny Grossman, to Chief Scientist, and shortly after the spin-off of the Natural Heritage Network-oriented Central Science staff into a separate 501(c)3 organization, ultimately named NatureServe, Alan was promoted to Chief Ecologist. The Ecology Program at this time consisted of 32 employees, all but 4 on “soft money” and located in Virginia, North Carolina, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Colorado, and Ecuador, so Alan's job became less focused on field work and more focused on negotiating formal agreements, contracts, and budget spreadsheets.

"Alan's contribution is of course immense both from the flora side as well as plant communities. What I appreciate from Alan's keys and perspective is he tries to incorporate an ecological connection to species separations. From the US Forest Service perspective, I appreciate Alan's willingness to work with an agency that does not always have a conservation perspective. His voice has been helpful for validating internal botanical resource concerns for questionable projects. Alan knows when to be diplomatic to develop respect from opposing individuals. When he was at NatureServe, Alan helped to move USFS acceptance of a national and local plant community classification, as archived and/or delineated by NatureServe. I appreciate that Alan has always indicated that the USFS lands have a lot of ecological/plant significance that should be highlighted and respected. During the Uwharrie National Forest plan revision, he provided excellent rare species and plant community info, with a broad perspective indicating the contribution that the Uwharrie NF provides for Piedmont flora and plant communities."—Gary Kauffman, US Forest Service

FLORA OF VIRGINIA PROJECT (2001-2012, plus...)

Alan's home state of Virginia had never had a 'state flora’—not since Gronovius's Flora Virginica (1762)—and under the leadership of Chris Ludwig at the Virginia Department of Conservation, a project was initiated in 2001 to develop a modern flora for the Commonwealth. Eleven years later, in 2012, the Flora of Virginia was published, with authors Alan, Chris Ludwig, and Johnny Townsend, editor Bland Crowder, and primary illustrator Lara Call Gastinger—250 years after
Gronovius’s book and, as the *Flora of Virginia* Project’s promotions put it: “A new flora for the Old Dominion—and not a century too soon!” The work was a massive project with strong funding from private and public sources and earned five recognitions: Thomas Jefferson Award for Conservation (2014), the Annual Literature Award of the Council on Botanical and Horticultural Libraries (2014), Commendation by the Senate of Virginia (Joint Resolution No. 385) (2013), the Ivey F. Lewis Distinguished Service Award of the Virginia Academy of Science (2013), and the Director’s Award from the Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation (2013). In 2017, the *Flora of Virginia* app was released, providing innovative “graphic keying.” An updated edition of the *Flora of Virginia* is under development in 2019.

“I met Alan Weakley in November 1988 at a southeastern Natural Heritage conference held in Georgia. At that point, Alan was the Natural Heritage botanist for North Carolina and I was the newly hired botanist for the Virginia Natural Heritage Program. I was relatively new to botany, hopelessly in love with plants, and totally intimidated by the competency and depth of knowledge of my southeastern peers. Alan was among the elite of this group and I was in awe. My only Alan-specific memory of that trip was sitting next to him on a bus ride to a field site and Alan sharing with me his copious notes scribbled (if my memory serves) all over the pages of his tattered Radford, Ahles, and Bell.

“Natural Heritage Botanists, particularly those in adjoining states, talk all the time, and over the next few years, I got to know Alan. His intellect and deep knowledge of plants never failed to impress me. Sometime in the early-mid 90s, Alan shared with me his humble draft of a new Flora he was writing and welcomed any notes or comments. I am not remembering his Flora’s geographical scope at that point, but I believe it just barely exceeded the Carolinas. As we all know, the geographic coverage of his endeavor has grown just a tad!

“I have always been amazed at Alan’s ability to multitask. In 2010, Alan, Johnny Townsend, Bland Crowder, and I were working hard to produce the Flora of Virginia, and that demanded some involved face-to-face meetings to determine which species to include in the work. We met at Alan and Julie’s house to ensconce ourselves away from our bustling workplaces and affectionately referred to these meetings as the Boothe Hill Summits, named after the lane where they lived. I kid you not—Alan could engage fully in these meetings, while playing online Scrabble, answering emails, and producing something delicious in the adjacent kitchen.

“I consider Alan to be the best botanist I will ever know.”—Chris Ludwig, retired VA NHP

**DUKE PhD REDUX (2003-2005)**

In 2002, Alan was hired at UNC-Chapel Hill with the condition that he complete his academic credentials with a PhD. However, the trail was cold on Alan’s work on *Asplenium* and the Duke Botany Department no longer existed, so this meant starting anew. Norm Christensen once again chaired Alan’s committee, this time in the Nicholas School of the Environment. The southeastern Flora that Alan had been working on for a decade formed the core of his dissertation, and he added analytical chapters focused on the biogeography, ecological relationships and evolutionary origins of the flora; taxonomic “lumping” and “splitting” over time; and the role of ongoing inventory and selection of conservation targets in conservation planning. His 3240-page dissertation, “Change over time in our understanding of the flora of the southeastern United States: implications for plant systematics, bioinformatics, and conservation,” was completed in 2005.
“I have had the great pleasure of knowing Alan for nearly 40 years. I served as his doctoral advisor, although it was often unclear who was advising whom. Alan is quite simply the best botanist I have ever known. I believe this derives in part because of his joint interest in ecology and systematics, which is the foundation for his ability to discern the rich variety that exists within what most of us had long considered homogeneous taxa. He is a gifted and enthusiastic teacher; among the many graduate students I have worked with, he was the only one who had his own graduate students. He combines these talents with uncommon generosity, kindness, and wit.”—Norm Christensen, retired Duke University

DIRECTOR OF THE UNC HERBARIUM (PART OF THE NORTH CAROLINA BOTANICAL GARDEN)
—and—
ADJUNCT ASSISTANT/ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR, DEPARTMENT OF BIOLOGY AND ENVIRONMENT, ECOLOGY, AND ENERGY PROGRAM, UNC-CHAPEL HILL (2002-present)

In 2002, Alan was hired to become the 8th Curator (after Coker, Stewart, Radford, Ahles, Bozeman, Leonard, and Massey) and the 3rd Director of the UNC-Chapel Hill Herbarium and adjunct faculty at UNC-Chapel Hill. For Alan, it was an opportunity to give back to his alma mater and the Botanical Garden; to create the new flora for the Carolinas and the region beyond, following in the footsteps of Radford, Ahles, and Bell; to teach the undergraduate course, Local Flora, that he had taken from Jim Massey almost three decades before; to work to “cure plant blindness” in undergraduates; and to train a new generation of botanists, plant ecologists, and conservation professionals. The Garden’s mission as a Conservation Garden, the resource of the largest herbarium collection of the southeastern flora, and the opportunity to mentor undergraduate and graduate students were all a natural development in Alan’s career. In this role, he teaches university classes; advises doctoral, master's, and undergraduate honors students; teaches continuing education classes, serves on the leadership team of the Garden, develops federal, state, and private grants and contracts to support the Herbarium’s mission; describes new species; writes scientific papers about the communities and species of the region; serves the Flora of North America project as Southeastern Regional Review Coordinator, author of treatments, and Board member; and serves the US National Vegetation Classification as Southeastern Editor and member of the Vegetation Classification Panel.

“During my years as Director of the North Carolina Botanical Garden, there were times when the stars seemed to align, and the path seemed suddenly unobstructed. At the top of the list was when Alan Weakley accepted the Directorship of the UNC Herbarium. This was set in motion when the Department of Biology saw that it was no longer the best fit for the Herbarium, an occasion that brought both sadness (when I put on my faculty hat) and the most incredible joy, that the Garden and the Herbarium would make a great partnership. We immediately knew that there was no one better suited to guide the future of the Herbarium than Alan Weakley, a scientist who was not only the acknowledged expert in southeastern botany but someone with broad interests and accomplishments in ecology and conservation that matched the Garden’s mission. That we could attract Alan to accept this position (and to return to his undergraduate alma mater) meant that this partnership would carry the Herbarium into a period of important accomplishments and that the importance of plants and conservation in the Southeast would have support and energy. At the time, I knew that the Garden had been handed a treasure and with Alan’s hiring I knew the key player had joined the team. The results—research, publications, grants, digitization, students, and more—have proved the case
remarkably. And, as everyone, even Alan, would agree, there is more to come.”—Peter White, UNC-Chapel Hill and retired Director of the North Carolina Botanical Garden

“Alan has solidly and decisively reinforced the tradition of Chapel Hill as the Botanical Capital of the South. He has achieved this through remarkable scholarship, leadership, innovation, generosity, and camaraderie.

“Aside from the Southeast, Alan belongs in the discussion with the very best of North American botanists: Torrey — Gray — Michaux — Rafinesque — Engelmann — Fernald — Small — Cronquist —&— Weakley.”—Brian Keener, Assistant Dean of the School of Graduate Studies, Assistant Professor of Biology, Curator of UWA Herbarium

“What I appreciate most about Alan, in addition to his prodigious command of the Flora and his ability to interpret it for others, is his down-to-Earth demeanor and inclusive and collaborative spirit. He is always encouraging of younger and less accomplished students of the flora and is just an all-around genuine and supportive guy. I first met him in person at an Association of Southeastern Biologists Meeting years ago (though we had corresponded a little bit prior to this about various botanical matters). Having met other “big names” in the field over the years who were rather pretentious, full of themselves, and dismissive of upstarts, I admit I was a little apprehensive in meeting Alan. But he was the opposite of the snooty academician, immediately introducing himself, inquiring about my work, and complimenting whatever modest accomplishments of mine he was aware of. How refreshing (and what a relief) to see that kind of attitude in someone as renowned as Alan. I knew then and there that this was someone I wanted to work with in the future and we have been collaborating on various levels since. A few years back I was seriously considering pursuing a PhD but was already older than most, with two kids and a pretty well-developed career. I knew if I was going to justify the upheaval of my and my family’s lives and go through with it, it would have to be done under one of the best people in the region and with someone I respected and could work with. Alan was one of only two people I considered approaching. Ultimately I bailed on the PhD pursuit, but am still collaborating with Alan on several major projects, most recently on a Flora of Arkansas. Alan is certainly a wealth of knowledge but he works to share it freely, not hoard it, and this is a great contribution in itself. This is something we should all strive to emulate and I appreciate Alan for showing us how to do it.”—Theo Witsell, Ecologist/Chief of Research, Arkansas Natural Heritage Commission

“It is an honor to call Alan a friend and a colleague. I first met him in 2005 when I visited the NCU Herbarium, but I knew this giant of American botany long before we came face to face. Two-and-a-half years ago and some 11 years after we first met, Theo Witsell and I co-founded the Southeastern Grasslands Initiative. As we were forming this new conservation program that aims to conserve, research, and rebuild Southern grasslands across a 23-state region, we had the tall order of identifying people to join on our team. Alan was the first person we called, while drafting the original concept of SGI from a ratty motel room in the Iron Mountains of Missouri. We knew we wanted Alan to help form part of the core team of SGI and we hoped he would say yes. The reasons why we wanted and needed him on our team are numerous. We believe that he possesses something special that no other living botanist or ecologist in the South can claim. His work experiences and research interests have taken him to nearly every corner of the Southeast, from the arid canyons of the Edwards Plateau of Texas and the sands of Peninsular Florida to the shale barrens and grass balds of Appalachia. Alan is one of the only people we know who can close his eyes and immediately be transported to almost any place in
the South. In his mind’s eye, he can see the landscape, he can rattle off from memory dozens of species found in each of the dominant ecosystem types in a given region (and in each stratum!), he can elaborate on the vegetation and its relationship to climate, soils, geology, and can expound on the detailed biogeography of each region, from deep time to the present. As if his knowledge of the land, plant communities, and biogeography aren’t enough, he just happens to be intimately familiar with the vast majority of the ca. 7,000 species of the Southeast such that he can identify most by sight without having to resort to keying them out in his tome, Weakley’s Flora of the Southeastern States, which is now the standard reference for southeastern U.S. plants for most botanists and ecologists. The brilliance of his encyclopedic mind is something to behold and yet he is so humble and approachable as to be liked by all who meet him. It is for these reasons that we want and need Alan on our team to help revolutionize the way we conserve our vanishing and highly imperiled Southern grasslands. Here’s to many more years of collaboration!“—Dwayne Estes, Executive Director, Southeastern Grasslands Initiative

TRUSTEE, NORTH CAROLINA NATURAL HERITAGE TRUST FUND (2008-2013)

In 2008, Alan was appointed a Trustee of the North Carolina Natural Heritage Trust Fund. During the six-year period when Alan served as a Trustee, the Trust Fund allocated about $200,000,000 in state funds to natural area acquisition and biological inventory in North Carolina, an expenditure that leveraged at least that much again in federal and private funds, literally remaking the state’s landscape of protected natural areas (state parks, plant conservation preserves, game lands, state forests)—all of which are managed for long-term conservation and the long-term benefit of both the public and the state’s biodiversity. As one of the few scientists directing the expenditures of the Trust, Alan helped make sure that acquisitions strategically targeted lands with the highest ecological significance and conservation importance.

“Alan has had a remarkable history of habitat conservation successes across NC. His contributions range from iconic sites such as Grandfather Mountain, Bluff Mountain, the Roan Mountain massif and Panthertown Valley in the Southern Blue Ridge, to the less well-known, but equally important, Carolina bays, Longleaf Pine savannas and the state’s remaining, intact maritime forests.

“Alan’s efforts have included innumerable hours of field work, documentation, and publishing as well as serving as Trustee with the North Carolina Natural Heritage Trust Fund, allocating public funds to the acquisition and protection of many of North Carolina’s most important natural areas.”—Fred Annand, The Nature Conservancy

“I have known Alan Weakley for over 30 years. We first met while at a Natural Heritage conference in New Orleans in 1986. While others were free to roam the city, I tried to slip away to the Tulane Herbarium unnoticed, but observant Alan and one other person insisted on tagging along. We were looking at old Louisiana records, and even then, to my amazement, Alan Weakley had complete confidence in annotating several historic specimens.

“My second meeting of Alan was at a US Fish & Wildlife Service two-day regional meeting of Natural Heritage, federal agency, and academic botanists from around the Southeast at a state park. After the first day of talks, a group of us went hiking. Alan Weakley brought his Radford in the field to key out any unknown plants. Within minutes this group of top botanists was following ‘that guy.’
“Alan has great intellect and a capacity to retain information. He not only knows the Southeastern Flora (and many others), he knows worldwide ranges and habitats of each species. He has an insatiable appetite for knowledge, classification, history, and culture—natural and human. Consider his Flora, in which he keeps expanding the area it covers. He is a great teacher and willingly shares his knowledge.

“Throughout Alan’s career as Natural Heritage Program Botanist, Southeastern Director of NatureServe, and UNC-Chapel Hill Herbarium Director, he has not only been constantly working on flora and natural community classifications, he has been significantly influencing conservation outcomes. His life’s work and leadership have resulted in thousands of acres protected, hundreds of thousands of dollars raised, and untold number of people influenced—and his work and achievements will continue for future generations.

“Along with J.K. Small, and others, Alan Weakley will be remembered as one of the botanical ‘greats.’ He is a living legend and we are all still following ‘that guy.’”—Nelwyn McInnis, Southern Wild, formerly of The Nature Conservancy in Louisiana

ADDITIONAL AWARDS AND SERVICE

In addition to the awards mentioned above for the Flora of Virginia, Alan’s achievements in botany and conservation have been repeatedly recognized, including the Center for Plant Conservation Star Award (2015), Distinguished Service Award of the North Carolina Division of Parks and Recreation (1992), Volunteer Award of the North Carolina Chapter of The Nature Conservancy (1989), and Stewardship Award of the North Carolina Chapter of The Nature Conservancy (1982).

Alan serves or has served on numerous boards and committees, and one of the distinctive features of his career has been his dedication to service. Some of these are listed here:

- Advisor, Southeast Resilient Landscapes Fund, Open Space Institute, Inc., 2015-2018
- Recipient, Larry E. Morse Visiting Botany Fellowship, NatureServe, 2015
- Member, Ecological Society of America Vegetation Panel, 2002-present
- Member, Federal Geographic Data Committee, Vegetation Classification Hierarchy Revisions Working Group, 2005-present
- Executive Committee (2009-2012) and Member of Board of Directors (2006-present), Flora of North America Association, 2006-present
- Chair, North Carolina Plant Conservation Program Scientific Committee, 2004-present (Member 2002-2004)
- Member-at-large, Executive Board, Society of Herbarium Curators, 2007-2009
- Member, Editorial Board, Castanea, and Member-at-large, Executive Council, Southern Appalachian Botanical Society, 2007-2009

A FINAL NOTE FROM ALAN

Reading this account has been deeply embarrassing and humbling. It also makes me feel like I’m dead, somehow reading my obituary. Well, I’m still here and aiming to do a lot more before I’m
Let's start with *Wildflowers of the Atlantic Southeast*, a Timber Press field guide covering 1200 species from New Jersey to Georgia, published at about the time of this conference. It's a field guide my grandmothers and grandfathers, my mom and dad, and my aunt Eleanor would appreciate—rural people interested in and knowledgeable about the natural world around them but without a lot of scientific training. Without engaging a broad audience about natural diversity, we'll not be able to win political battles—in an increasingly urban and human-constrained landscape—on behalf of “the Real World” (as my mother calls it), all the non-human inhabitants of Earth. We need detailed scientific floras, but also apps and lay field guides to engage the public and citizen scientists.

Then there’s biodiversity science. We need to rapidly study the biodiversity of the southeastern United States, one of the world’s temperate zone “hotspots,” so we can better prioritize conservation action. “We don’t know jack...” about what’s in our backyards, and while we could focus on the Amazon and other biodiversity hotspots, it feels right (to me and for me) to focus on what I know well, and what has been around me my whole life, the rich biota of the Southeast. When I say “study that biodiversity,” I mean a multifactorial approach and one that focuses on actionable results. That includes describing new species (more than 10% of the plants of the Southeast have been described in my lifetime, and dozens of new species have been identified that await formal description), studying and classifying the natural communities and ecosystems that support those species, determining improved management regimes that will support the persistence of those ecosystems and species, working to see appropriate management implemented on public and private lands, and finding the funds and developing the relationships to broaden the coalition.

And training the next generation of scientists and natural resource managers—“combat” biologists for the future to wage smart, tenacious, and effective conservation inventory, protection, and management to support the Real World. We’ve got to do more to pass on our natural heritage to the next generation!

Still here? Here is an extended anecdote, just for fun:

“One hot and muggy July afternoon in the early 1990s, Alan and I were surveying lovely savannas and ponds on Camp Lejeune. We had just completed a botanical survey of a small group of ponds and were headed to the pine woods next door. To our right was a shrub thicket that suddenly began to move in a most unexpected way. Several of the shrubs turned out to be young marines festooned with leafy branches, the broken ends of which had been shoved through any orifice in their uniforms that would take them. This particular thicket had burned the previous winter, so the blackened faces of the marines made the camouflage that much better. I should also point out that these mobile shrubs were carrying rifles.

“The first of these vegetated marines made an oblique turn and headed straight for us.

“You’ve blown our cover! You’re captured!’

“Hi,’ we said in our best about-to-be-captured manner. ‘We’re with the state’s Natural Heritage Program and’ blah blah blah. He listened politely while his fellow shrubs waited in the
background. Then, as if we had said nothing, he said in a quiet voice, ‘Okay, look, I’m going to pretend to capture you. I’m going to tell you to get down on your knees and put your hands behind your back. Then I’m going to pretend to tie your hands and gag you. And then I’m going to leave.’

“And he proceeded to do just that, miming the actions while saying to us, ‘Now I’m tying your hands, now I’m gagging you.’ On our knees with heads bowed, we looked like model prisoners. But our heads were not bowed because we were terrified; they were bowed because we were trying to conceal our laughter. The young marine then continued on his way and the others followed after him. We stood up, ‘untied’ ourselves, and then noticed an older Marine, a sergeant, perhaps all of 25 years, approaching from the same direction that our captors had.

“’What’d he say to you?’ the sergeant asked. Alan and I recounted the details, and he replied, ‘Aw, he screwed up.’

“But we thought not. I doubt that the young marine’s training had prepared him for the clash of separate realities. There’s only one reality during war, and that’s what he was in training for. We figured he weighed his choices and decided it was better to be wrong by making the capture than to be wrong by not making it. He would have gotten chewed out either way. In the military, catch-and-release is a difficult concept to grasp.” —Richard LeBlond, retired NC NHP