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Exemplars, Records, Tools: Organisms in Botanical Research, c. 1750-1850

Mueller-Wille, Staffan (2009) Exemplars, Records, Tools: Organisms in Botanical Research, c. 1750-1850. In *[2009] SPSP 2009: Society for Philosophy of Science in Practice (Minnesota, June 18-20, 2009)*.

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Abstract

In botany, garden and herbarium specimens have been used for purposes of systematic research since the mid-sixteenth century. The associated practices of collecting, exchanging and collating specimens were most influentially synthesized by Carl Linnaeus in the mid-eighteenth, although it should take roughly a century after Linnaeus's death until they were formally canonized in international rules of nomenclature. The role of specimens and type-specimens in the history of natural history – a "metaphysics in action", as Lorraine Daston calls it – has been discussed in a number of historical and philosophical studies in recent years. What has largely been overlooked, however, is the fact, that alongside the rise of the type specimen method, plants began to acquire another role in botanical research. In hybridization experiments, plants were increasingly used as tools to manipulate other plants, and the offspring resulting from these interventions as a kind of recording device to score the effects of hybridization. In my presentation I will look at select hybridisation experiments of the period to unravel the intricate relationship between natural historical and physiological concerns which governed this experimental practice.

Keywords:	biology, botany, experiment, natural history, model organisms
Subjects:	General Issues: Models and Idealization General Issues: Experimentation
Conferences and Volumes:	[2009] SPSP 2009: Society for Philosophy of Science in Practice (Minnesota, June 18-20, 2009)
ID Code:	4746
Deposited By:	Mueller-Wille, Staffan
Deposited On:	10 July 2009

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