

Ribbens, Eric. 2008. The Wired Herbarium #4: Aluka. In The Vasculum (newsletter of the Society for Herbarium Curators), January 2008.

<http://www.aluka.org> Aluka is an ambitious website that plans to integrate a wide variety of information about Africa. Funded in part by the Mellon Foundation, Aluka expects institutions to pay an annual fee for access. I found I was able to access Aluka content but I was restricted from viewing scanned specimens at a large image size. Registered users have considerably more access, including downloadable .pdfs, larger images, and software that apparently enables better image viewing.

Aluka contains far more than just botanical information. However, I'm choosing to review it for its botanical content. Aluka claims that when botanical content is complete it will have more than 250,000 images (the website actually says type specimens) covering more than 60,000 species of plants from Africa and adjacent islands. The plant database may be searched by scientific name, use, geographic area, or collector. Results include a small image of the scanned specimen, scientific name, collector information (name # date), and location information. The search engine is unusually complete, with links that allow users to quickly cross-search by herbarium, scientific name, or collector. Some of these links are unlikely to be useful. For example, why would one want to search the database for just a particular species epithet? Searching for officinale, for example, will turn up dozens of different species whose only similarity is sharing that epithet in their name.

Another dataset that may be of interest to botanists is the Pretoria African Plant Slide Collection, a set of more than 3300 scanned slides of living plants. This collection is sortable by several different parameters, but I found sorting by taxon name far most useful. Unfortunately, there does not seem to be a search engine, so after sorting by taxon you will have to skip around through 189 pages to find any particular species. Thus, for example, it is only by trial and error that you will find *Zea mays* on page 148. Even more annoying, the last 40 pages are images that are not linked to a taxon group yet. Thus, there are a number of images of *Diospyros lycioides* on page 168, which presumably will eventually be linked to another set of images of the same species on page 78.

In summary, this website is primarily of interest to those of you working with African species. The site is useful without registration, but joining the site will substantially increase the quality of the results. Without registration images are at too low a resolution to be able to provide any real botanical information, for example. However, if you want African information, this website is potentially invaluable. It is also an interesting example of a way to design and offer a metadata resource site.