



Botanical researcher is tuned in to the tiniest plants—and details

Patricia Eckel, MA '84 & BA '81

ECKEL CLOSE-UP

Hobbies Playing the piano, hiking (she's a fellow of the Explorers Club), running 10-milers, reading about financial history; **Influencing figure** Rita Levi-Montalcini, a Nobel Prize-winning Jewish scientist who survived persecution under Benito Mussolini during World War II; **Words to live by** "Do not fear hard times—much that is good can come from them."

Today, Patricia Eckel, MA '84 & BA '81, is internationally acclaimed for her work as a researcher, an illustrator and an editor of botanical

Latin. Eckel's accolades include a 2007 Jill Smythies Award for Botanical Illustration from the Linnean Society of London, plus election as a fellow of that two-century-old biological society—a rare honor.

But growing up in Niagara Falls, N.Y., the classics, particularly ancient Greek tales, were what fired the scientist's imagination. That focus, combined with Eckel's natural artistic talents, led teachers to push her toward college art programs.

At UB, she was halfway through dual bachelor's degrees, cum laude, in Greek and Latin classics and art history before she discovered her true calling.

"I met somebody who needed an artist," she explains, in self-deprecating fashion. "He happened to be a scientist describing new species, and he needed two things: first, to prepare a description of his new species in Latin, and second, to be able to illustrate it." Eckel was the perfect collaborator.

She soon developed a passion for bryology, the study of a group of minuscule plants including the mosses, and completed

a manual of botanical Latin en route to a UB master's degree in biology. With a mind remarkably attuned to the tiny but crucial details of scientific inquiry, she says, "I found botany to be incredibly rich in opportunities."

Eckel helped found the Niagara Frontier Botanical Society, then leaped to appointments with the Buffalo Museum of Science, the Smithsonian Institution, the American Bryological and Lichenological Society, and the New York Botanical Garden. In 2002, she and her husband, bryologist Richard Zander, moved to St. Louis to work for the Missouri Botanical Garden.

The prolific botanist returns to New York quarterly to continue study of the Niagara River Gorge, a biodiverse "hot spot"—and her pace shows no signs of slowing. Among Eckel's goals: completing a grammatical dictionary of botanical Latin; compiling a book of Buffalo Society of Natural Sciences founder George William Clinton's correspondence; and continuing her work on the "Flora of North America," whose Volume 27 (pictured above) she illustrated in its entirety, in addition to contributing 16 scientific treatments of genera.

"It's like a game of chicken," she says of cataloging plants. "You've got to go out and study it before it's gone."

Story by Margaret Bauer, with photo by Matt Marcinkowski