

Tribute to Art Whistler

By Eric Tepe

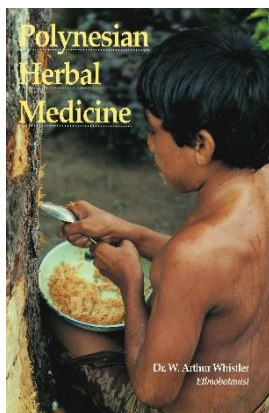
I met Dr. Art Whistler, virtually, in November 2010, when I started working as a volunteer research botanist in the Margaret H. Fulford Herbarium at the University of Cincinnati. When I arrived at the herbarium, I was surprised to find two large boxes of mostly unidentified specimens from Samoa, collected by Curtis Gates Lloyd (CGL) in 1904-1905, that had been packaged but never sent. I asked around and learned that they had been boxed up for, but never sent to “a gentleman in Hawaii who was working on the Flora of Samoa.” A bit of searching the web and an email gave way to an on-and-off correspondence and growing friendship that lasted for many years, until Art’s tragic death this past April from COVID-19.

I sent the boxes to Art, which contained 416 specimens of Samoan plants, and to my amazement, he returned the loan within six months, having identified all of the specimens. This was truly remarkable for several reasons: first, a turnaround time of six months is close to light speed in terms of processing natural history collections; and secondly, many of CGL’s collections are sterile (they lack flowers or fruits, which are often critical for identification) and fragmentary (many consist of one or two detached leaves, which makes identification exceedingly difficult). The fact that he could identify these partial specimens at all is a testament to his intimate knowledge of the Samoan flora. Thanks to Art Whistler, the UC Herbarium now holds one of the earliest large collections of Samoan flora that is fully identified and nomenclaturally up to date.



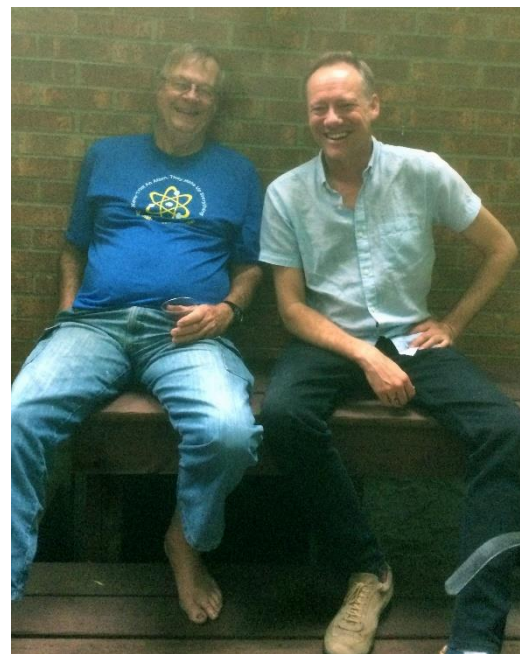
Hedychium flavescens as identified by Whistler

Art was, in no uncertain terms, an expert on the flora of the South Pacific. After serving in the Peace Corps in Samoa during the 1970s – living in Apia, the same town where CGL lived for six months in 1904-1905 – he went to graduate school to study the Samoan flora, earning his Ph.D. from the University of Hawaii in 1979. Upon graduation, he jumped at the opportunity of a post-doctoral position focused on the ethnobotany of the South Pacific. With his characteristic sense of humor, Art loved to say that after accepting the position, the first thing he did was run to the dictionary to look up the word “ethnobotany”!



Over the following decades Art became an undisputed authority on the flora and ethnobotany of the South Pacific. His passion for understanding the ways in which native peoples of that region integrated plants in their daily life led him to write over a dozen books on the subject: *Plants of the Canoe People: An Ethnobotanical Voyage Through the South Pacific*, *Polynesian Herbal Medicine*, and *Plants and Samoan Culture*, among others. He worked closely with locals and trained many Pacific Islanders in botany and research techniques, becoming well known throughout the region. Evidence of the respect and esteem that islanders held for him is the fact that he was widely known in Samoa as “*Tupu o le Vao Matua*” or the “King of the Forest!”

I was fortunate to finally meet Art in person when he visited Cincinnati last June to attend the 60th annual meeting of the Society of Economic Botany. During his visit, he also gave a fascinating talk at the Lloyd Library and Museum, entitled *Polynesian Herbal Medicine*. In my interactions with him, I was always struck by the deep knowledge and passion that he put into his work, and his unwavering dedication to continue his research. Art was among the first people in Hawaii to come down with COVID-19, and as a result, was not tested and was sent home with a course of antibiotics. He was eventually admitted to the hospital, but by then it was too late, and he became Hawaii's third COVID-19 casualty. His death is truly a tragic loss for the field of ethnobotany, as well as for those of us who considered him a friend, a colleague, and a model botanist. We must be grateful, however, for his life's work, his kindness, and his friendship. Without a doubt, "the King of the Forest" will be remembered for a very long time by the people of his beloved South Pacific islands, where he touched so many lives, and by the rest of us who benefit from his legacy.



Art Whistler with Eric Tepe at 2019 meeting of the Society of Economic Botany

For further tribute to Dr. Whistler, the University of Hawaii published [*In Memoriam: Ethnobotanist and Conservationist Art Whistler*](#).

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