

NYBG

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NYBG Scientist Michael J. Balick, Ph.D., Receives the 2018 Fairchild Medal for Plant Exploration from the National Tropical Botanical Garden

One of the Highest Honors in the Botanical Sciences, the Award Recognizes Dr. Balick's Decades of Research to Document Plant Uses around the World



Charles R. "Chipper" Wichman, Jr., President, Chief Executive Officer and Director of the National Tropical Botanical Garden, presents the 2018 Fairchild Medal to NYBG's Dr. Michael J. Balick. Photo by Lynda LaRocca

Bronx, NY—Michael J. Balick, Ph.D., Vice President for Botanical Science and Director and Philecology Curator of the Institute of Economic Botany at The New York Botanical Garden (NYBG), has been awarded the 2018 David Fairchild Medal for Plant Exploration by the National Tropical Botanical Garden (NTBG). The Hawai'i-based conservation, research, and educational organization recognized Dr. Balick for a career spanning more than four decades of botanical fieldwork and research around the globe.

The Fairchild Medal, one of the most prestigious awards in the botanical sciences, was presented to Dr. Balick recently at a black-tie dinner at The Kampong in Coconut Grove, Florida, NTBG's historic garden and former residence of David Fairchild (1869–1954), the great plant collector and influential botanist.

Noting that the Fairchild Medal is the highest honor that can be bestowed upon a researcher who explores remote parts of the world to discover important plants, Charles R. “Chipper” Wichman, Jr., President, CEO and NTBG Director, called Dr. Balick an “outstanding choice” for the award. “Over the past four decades Mike has been at the cutting edge of what we now call ‘biocultural conservation’—the conservation of both the natural world and the indigenous cultures that have evolved with it,” he said. “As an economic botanist, Mike exemplifies Fairchild’s desire to enrich human society by traveling to faraway places to search for new plants and cultural knowledge.”

Like the Fairchild Medal’s namesake, Dr. Balick has many decades of experience conducting botanical fieldwork and exploration in regions as diverse as Central and South America, the Caribbean, South Asia, and the Middle East. Much of Dr. Balick’s work since 1998 has focused on understanding the diversity, distribution, and uses of plants in tropical Pacific island nations, including The Federated States of Micronesia, Palau, and, most recently, Vanuatu.

“It is an extraordinary honor to be in the company of those people who have won this award,” Dr. Balick said. “Some of my personal botanical heroes are among those who have received the Fairchild Medal. Over many years, I have been fortunate to have worked with many hundreds of talented people throughout the world in a quest to collect plants and document knowledge of their traditional uses. They all share in this award, as do my colleagues at The New York Botanical Garden.”

In his career at The New York Botanical Garden, Dr. Balick has studied and written extensively on the medicinal, culinary, and toxic properties of tropical plants. Among the many books he has authored or co-authored are *Rainforest Remedies: One Hundred Healing Herbs of Belize*; *Plants, People and Culture: The Science of Ethnobotany*; *Handbook of Poisonous and Injurious Plants*; and *Rodale’s 21st-Century Herbal: A Practical Guide for Healthy Living Using Nature’s Most Powerful Plants*

“The New York Botanical Garden is extremely proud of the vital research that Dr. Balick has conducted around the world as one of the leaders of NYBG’s 200-member Science staff,” said Gregory Long, Chief Executive Officer and The William C. Steere Sr. President of The New York Botanical Garden. “Mike exemplifies the Garden’s long-standing dedication to exploring and documenting the many complex ways in which people use plants to sustain and improve their lives. This distinguished honor recognizes his achievement in helping local people conserve their unique traditional plant knowledge, customs, and biodiversity.”

Dr. Balick is the third scientist affiliated with The New York Botanical Garden to be honored with the Fairchild Medal. Professor Sir Ghilleen Prance, who had a 25-year career at the Garden before he became Director of the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew and is now a Distinguished Counsellor to NYBG's Board of Trustees, received the medal in 2000. Scott A. Mori, Ph.D., previously the Nathaniel Lord Britton Curator of Botany and now Curator Emeritus, was the recipient in 2007.

A Career Devoted to Exploring the Many Links Between People and Plants

Born in Philadelphia, Dr. Balick grew up in Delaware. As a high school student, he was inspired by Fairchild's seminal 1938 book, *The World Was My Garden*, an account of the plant explorer's world travels. "After reading that book, I was hooked—this was to be the field for me," Dr. Balick recalled.

While pursuing his undergraduate degree in horticulture at the University of Delaware under the mentorship of the distinguished horticulturist Professor Richard W. Lighty, Dr. Balick conducted fieldwork in Israel, studying the plants of the deserts, oases, and mountains.

As a graduate student at Harvard University, Dr. Balick studied under the famed plant explorer Professor Richard Evans Schultes, who sent him on his first field collecting trip to the Amazon in 1976. Shortly after graduating from Harvard in 1980 with a Ph.D. in biology, he joined The New York Botanical Garden.

In 1981 he co-founded the Garden's Institute of Economic Botany with Professor Prance, the head of NYBG's scientific research program at the time. The Institute, one of the largest and most active programs of its kind in the nation, is devoted to furthering knowledge of the relationship between plants and people.

With the support of the Garden and public and private donors, Dr. Balick has undertaken a series of ambitious research projects, first in the tropics of the Western Hemisphere and more recently in the Pacific. When studying a particular region, he seeks to address three questions: What is the composition of the local flora? How have people traditionally used the plants and how do they use them in modern times? How can those evidence-based traditional medicinal uses benefit primary healthcare delivery in the local setting?

This process has led to the establishment of national and community conservation areas along with a more sustainable and resilient lifestyle in the face of global change. Currently Dr. Balick and his NYBG collaborator, Gregory M. Plunkett, Ph.D., Director and Curator of the Cullman Program for Molecular Systematics, are helping to lead a 10-year project in Tafea Province, Vanuatu, with a team of local and international collaborators, including scientists and students from the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa; California State University, East Bay;

Swarthmore College; University of the South Pacific; Vanuatu Department of Forests, and Tafea Kaljoral Senta. The project focuses on the collection and study of a wide variety of plants and fungi on multiple islands, from the microscopic to fleshy fungi, lichens, mosses, ferns, and fruiting and flowering plant species. It also is documenting the cultural uses of plants and gathering local-language names of plants and objects made with plant materials. Some of the languages spoken in Tafea Province are considered endangered with fewer and fewer speakers; this biocultural conservation program will help to ensure the survival of several of these languages.

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The New York Botanical Garden is a museum of plants, an educational institution, and a scientific research organization. Founded in 1891, the Botanical Garden is one of the world's preeminent centers for studying plants at all levels, from the whole organism down to its DNA. Garden scientists conduct fundamental research on plants and fungi globally, as well as on the many relationships between plants and people. A National Historic Landmark, the Garden's 250-acre site is one of the greatest botanical gardens in the world and the largest in any city in the United States, distinguished by the beauty of its diverse landscape and extensive collections and gardens, as well as by the scope and excellence of its programs in horticulture, education, and plant research and conservation. Learn more: nybg.org

The New York Botanical Garden, 2900 Southern Boulevard, Bronx, New York 10458

The New York Botanical Garden is located on property owned in full by the City of New York, and its operation is made possible in part by public funds provided through the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs. A portion of the Garden's general operating funds is provided by The New York City Council and The New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation. The Bronx Borough President and Bronx elected representatives in the City Council and State Legislature provide leadership funding.

Contact: Stevenson Swanson, 718.817.8512; sswanson@nybg.org.