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## UMaine Today



## Plant studies during the pandemic: UMaine instructor incorporates flexibility, support network to preserve outdoor learning

September 23, 2020

Interacting with plant life outdoors plays a crucial role in BIO 464 — Taxonomy of Vascular Plants. University of Maine students enrolled in the course typically collect local flora on and around campus for lab research, but this semester, they can harvest vegetation and conduct experiments from anywhere as a result of accommodations in response to COVID-19.

Jose “Dudu” Meireles, UMaine assistant professor of plant systematics, says clear instructions, prompt support from him and teacher’s assistants, and instructor flexibility allow 60 students across three sections of BIO 464 to either conduct coursework remotely or in person.

Lab work, in particular, now consists of independent projects that do not require microscopes and stereoscopes, although a magnifying glass might help. Meireles says labs will often require plant collection, but students can harvest them from their backyards, fields on campus, hiking trails, the Dwight B. Demeritt Forest, or any other area they choose. Using smartphones, students can capture pictures of the plants they gathered and submit a photographic portfolio, with information about each plant’s morphology and scientific name, via Brightspace.

Meireles says last week, for example, he tasked students with completing a fern scavenger hunt on campus. They worked in socially distanced teams to gather different ferns, identify them, describe their morphology and sketch distinguishing characteristics. Students not on campus collected plants from nearby habitats. All submitted annotate virtual collections.

“Remote students can contact their TA or me with questions or additional instructions,” Meireles says. “This support system is there at any point in their lab.”

To maintain classroom discussion, the UMaine assistant professor uses breakout rooms in Zoom for group activities, tasking students to team up and answer a particular question each lecture. They then reconvene for a classwide discussion about each groups’ responses.

“Students always have new ways of seeing things and I always learn something new from these discussions,” Meireles says.

The BIO 464 course also features a “Plants of the Day” activity this semester. Meireles says every lecture begins with two students introducing a plant they collected, showing it on camera, and describing various aspects of it.

“The reason why I love this ‘plants of the day’ activity is that the students play a critical role in teaching each other about plants,” Meireles says. “It is truly a community effort. Every student has a voice and helps to shape what we will learn as a group.”

Students enrolled in BIO 464 will learn the basic structure of plants, how to identify different plant groups, particularly among Maine flora; and how varying morphological, physiological and life history innovations have led to extensive biodiversity worldwide.

“Teaching has actually been great,” Meireles says. “Despite the many difficulties imposed by the pandemic, my students have been very interested and engaged in the lectures and labs.”

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