

'First Flowers' exhibit at UNL

By Mick Dyer
Staff Reporter

Flowering plants, as we know them today, have not always covered the earth. The first flowers emerged about 140 million years ago and have dominated the world's flora ever since.

The University of Nebraska State Museum in Morrill Hall is showing an exhibit, "The First Flowers," tracing the development of flowering plants.

The exhibit features photographs of such flowers as well as displays of fossil leaves, seeds and a cross-section of the trunk of an extinct tree.

Dr. Margaret Bolick, curator of botany for the museum, organized the exhibit. She said the rocks of the Dakota Formation in southeastern Nebraska record the change to a world of flowering plants "in a most spectacular manner."

"There are other places in the world where you can find pieces of flowering plants from this period,"

she said. "But the rocks in the Dakota Formation in Nebraska and northeastern Kansas is the only place in the world where intact fossil specimens from this period can be found."

"That's kind of exciting for Nebraska," she said.

'They were the first plants to take advantage of animal behavior'

—Bolick

Bolick said at least three different kinds of fossil flowers have been found in the Dakota sediments in Nebraska and Kansas. One is similar to the magnolia, another resembles the yucca, and the third is not quite like any other living flower, but seems to be related to Rosidae, which includes roses and their relatives.

Bolick said one theory botanists use to explain the shift to flowering

plants is that flowering plants are much more efficient in the way they grow and reproduce.

"They were the first plants to take advantage of animal behavior," she said.

"Scientists, including the late Nebraska author Loren Eiseley, have speculated that the change in plant life to a world dominated by flowering plants during the first half of the Cretaceous period made the evolution of humans and other mammals possible," Bolick said.

The reasoning is that flowering plants have fruits and abundant seeds, two calorie-rich sources of food for mammals.

Bolick said humans depend on flowering plants.

"One-half of the calories consumed by humans worldwide come from the grass family: corn, wheat and rice," she said.

The exhibit will remain on display on the main floor of Morrill Hall through May.



Butch Ireland/Daily Nebraskan

Bolick



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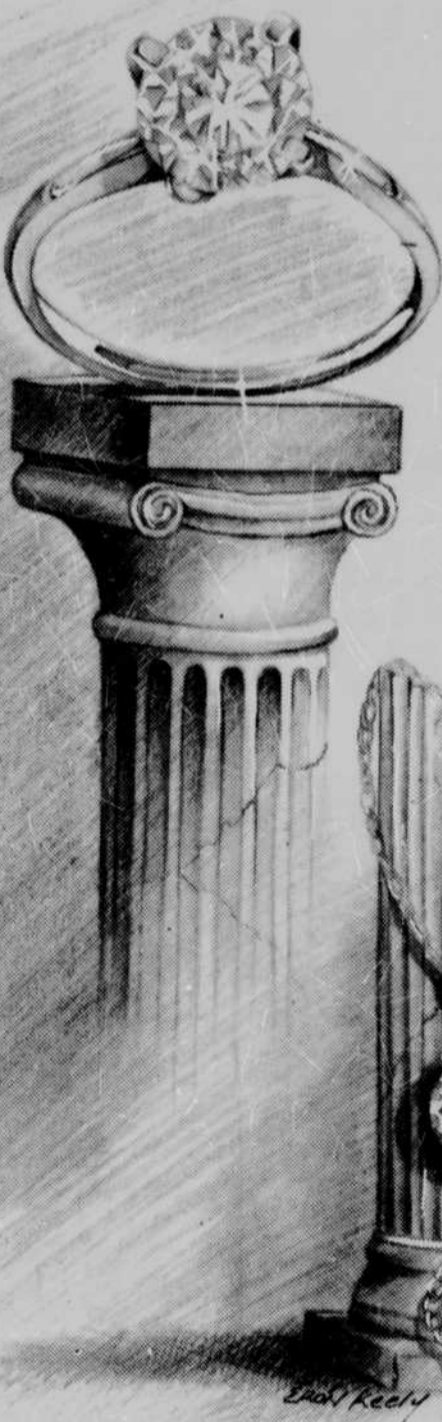
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