Alan R. Smith is a contemporary Asa Gray. As a curator, Alan has single-handedly built the fern section at the University of California, Berkeley herbarium into a state-of-the-art collection. An expert on biogeography, he has contributed to the development of current phylogenetic treatments of the ferns and lycophytes and authored or contributed significantly to floras on several continents. Alan and Asa would have had much common ground in conversations about plant diversity, floristics, and systematics.

Alan Smith was born in Sacramento, California in 1943, but spent his formative years in Kansas. He graduated from Topeka High School in 1961 and went on to Kansas State University from 1961–1965. There he was strongly influenced by his systematic botany professor and mentor, Theodore (Ted) Barkley, who helped Alan build not only an appreciation of plants but also an interest in their morphology and phylogeny. In 1966, Alan married Joan Elizabeth Scott, who has accompanied him on his career path and many of his far-flung forays ever since. Alan stayed in the Midwest for graduate work at Iowa State University, where he fell under the spell of John Mickel, a student of Warren (Herb) Wagner (Asa Gray Awardee 1990). After John steered him toward ferns, Alan never looked back. Alan earned his Ph.D. in 1969 and was immediately hired as a research botanist at Berkeley. In 1970 he published his first flora, Ferns and fern allies in the University of California Botanical Gardens, and began a life-long scholarly association with fellow research botanist at Berkeley, John Strother. The following year, Alan published three papers on the very complex fern genus Thelypteris, including a 143-page monograph on the New World species. Over the next three decades, Alan would publish more than 20 papers and book chapters on aspects of Thelypteris systematics.

Alan spent his entire professional career, spanning nearly four decades, in the Berkeley herbarium before retiring in 2007, and he continues to pursue new projects as a curator emeritus. In his curatorial role, Alan transformed the University of California, Berkeley herbarium into an essential collection for anyone working on fern and lycophyte systematics. In supporting Alan for the Asa Gray award, his colleagues commented on the importance of the fern collections at Berkeley. Michael Sundue (University of Vermont) placed Alan’s work in a global context by calling the Berkeley herbarium “the best-curated fern collection that I have ever seen,” He attributes this to Alan’s consistent updating of the specimens to capture current name changes and new phylogenetic relationships. Tom Ranker (University of Hawaii) described the identification services Alan provided to herbarium clientele as “really above and beyond the call of duty.” Brent Mishler (University of California, Berkeley) observed that the herbarium has “grown in quality because of Alan’s vigorous efforts at checking identifications and curating specimens in need of repair, etc. It has grown in importance because of the large number of voucher specimens being inserted and because of the annotations being done by Alan as well as outside collaborators.” Attributing Alan’s broad and deep knowledge to his identification of thousands of fern specimens sent to him every year as “gift for det.,” Robbin Moran (New York Botanical Garden) wrote: “It’s eerie to be in the herbarium with Alan because he knows so much: he knows the species characters, he knows their authors, he knows where the type was collected, he knows the geographic ranges and elevations.”

Alan is the authoritative expert on worldwide floristics of ferns and lycophytes. He has authored or co-authored floras of North America and Canada, Mexico, Guatemala, Mesoamerica, Ecuador, Peru, Venezuelan Guyana, and China. In “retirement,” he is completing floras of Bolivia and Venezuela. Concerning the flora of Mexican pteridophytes that Alan co-authored with John Mickel (and that was awarded the Engler Medal in Silver), Dave Barrington (University of Vermont) wrote: “the encyclopedic Pteridophytes captures