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Tanisha M. Williams—Recipient of the 2021 Peter Raven Award

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The American Society of Plant Taxonomists' (ASPT) Peter Raven Award honors individuals who have made exceptional outreach efforts to non-scientists. The deserving recipient of the 2021 Peter Raven Award is Dr. Tanisha Williams. Tanisha holds a B.S. from the Pennsylvania State University, a M.S. from California State University-Los Angeles, a Ph.D. from University of Connecticut, and is currently the Burpee Postdoctoral Fellow in Botany at Bucknell University. Although still in her early career stage, Tanisha excels at outreach to non-scientists, and she has already reached more members of the general public than most ASPT members will throughout our entire careers! Furthermore, her outreach spans generations and disciplines: children through adults, academic scientists to members of public. Tanisha's track record is impressive, indicative of the beginning stages of a successful career that includes broadening participation in botany via impactful education and outreach.

Tanisha's outreach efforts are both broad and deep, ranging from one-off public keynotes at some of the country's most recognized biodiversity institutions to founding #BlackBotanistsWeek, arguably the most impactful botanical engagement activity in recent memory. Tanisha cut her teeth in science communication by winning a 3-Minute Thesis Award at University of Connecticut as a graduate student before quickly establishing herself as a veritable public figure in her current position. She has given many invited keynote addresses, including at the California Academy of Sciences,

the National Research Council, and the Morton Arboretum. Interviews with Tanisha have been featured on science podcasts, including NPR's ShortWave. Her enthusiasm for plants (and the diversity of people who study plants) has been quoted in 17 national or international media outlets, including *Science Magazine*, *Essence Magazine*, *The Washington Post*, *USA Today*, and the *Sierra Club*, in addition to numerous local newspapers. She has even been featured on Nickelodeon's children's show *Noggin Knows!* Tanisha also has a significant social media presence, with more than 10,000 followers across platforms. This allowed Tanisha to quickly and effectively pivot her outreach to a virtual format in response to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic: her voice, already strong, has been strengthened and further amplified in the last two years.

In her outreach, Tanisha is a champion for the importance of Black perspectives in current and historical botany. Perhaps the most impactful of Tanisha's many outreach initiatives that center marginalized voices was founding #BlackBotanistsWeek (<https://blackbotanistsweek.weebly.com/>). Taking a broad and inclusive definition of "botanist," and deliberately seeking international participation, #BlackBotanistsWeek "is a celebration of Black people who love plants. This plant love manifests in many ways ranging from tropical field ecologist to plant geneticist, from horticulturalist to botanical illustrator. [Black Botanists Week] embrace[s] the multiple ways that Black people engage with and appreciate the global diversity of plant life." It was founded in direct response to events on May 25, 2020—the day that George Floyd was murdered by a Minneapolis police officer and that Christian Cooper was victim to a racist threat that weaponized police racial bias while birding in Central Park, New York City. While the first of these events jumpstarted a racial reckoning within the United States that continues today, in parallel, the second event began a necessary conversation about the safety of people of color in natural areas in this country, particularly among naturalists and life scientists. #BlackBotanistsWeek is one of many social media campaigns that serve to extend this conversation, highlighting the contribution of Black scholars to plant science and creating a safe virtual space for Black botanists to share their stories and find community. The launch was hugely successful and spotlighted a celebration of Black Botanists in their many forms. On the first day of the campaign on July 6, 2020, the #BlackBotanistsWeek hashtag reached 40,000 users, a number that extended to more than 223,000 people from all over the world by the end of the inaugural week. This was not siloed to a single week, however, and the hashtag usage has continued to climb through today (Williams et al. 2021). Last year, #BlackBotanistsWeek2021 built on the broad definition of a botanist by incorporating prominent

house plant science communicators and social media influencers. To demystify the process of obtaining a botanical career, the Black Botanists Week Committee organized a career panel featuring the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, South Africa's Kirstenbosch Head Horticulturist, and a Conservation Researcher. The ASPT was among various professional societies that officially supported this hugely successful initiative. In an effort to institutionalize the conversations brought forth by #BlackBotanistsWeek, Tanisha led the proposal, supported by ASPT, for the upcoming Botany 2022 symposium entitled "Black Botanical Legacy: Past, Present, and Future."

Tanisha's work has already changed public perception of who is considered a botanist. There is power in who are validated as contributing members in botany. A reframing of that criteria allows for broader participation and empowers Black youth to pursue such disciplines. Since founding #BlackBotanistsWeek, Tanisha has continued to champion underrepresented Black voices in the history of botany. She collated many unknown Black botanists in her lecture presented during the virtual series, Growing Black Roots: The Black Botanical Legacy, hosted by the Holden Forest and Gardens and organized by members of the Black Botanists Week Committee. Tanisha's lecture highlighted the many important crops of the African diaspora, the botanical giants in our history, and her own beautiful personal journey. Her well-researched lecture directly contributed to improving the accessibility for teachers to include Black botanists in their curricula through free lesson plans developed by the Holden Arboretum. Continued outreach that centers Black voices in natural history and plant science is imperative given the history of violence towards Black people in outdoor spaces, the great migration to northern cities and away from primarily agricultural societies, the historical exclusion from academia, and the resulting legacy effects seen today. Tanisha has taken a visible leadership role in this rewarding, necessary, but emotionally taxing undertaking.

While Tanisha's public outreach has already reached tens of thousands of individuals, the many small, often local outreach events that Tanisha leads are just as important as these large-audience events (or perhaps more so). These include invited workshops, structured conversations, and science fair mentorship at middle, elementary and high schools. She has significant experience in community-centered outreach events both in the U.S. and in South Africa, where she spent two years as a Fulbright U.S. Student and Alumni Ambassador. These experiences give Tanisha the opportunity to make

individual connections with a younger generation, making science more relatable to diverse communities. As a Black woman, Tanisha is an important role model to the students she has reached through these endeavors, helping to dispel the notion that the default scientist is white and male and creating a space for all attendees to imagine themselves as professional botanists. Tanisha is hard at work cultivating the next generation of ASPT members!

Finally, Tanisha is not only talented in outreach to the general public, she is also gifted in communicating the importance of science to policy makers, which has long-term implications for drafting impactful legislation. She has honed this skill by applying for and being funded to attend several science advocacy workshops and trainings. She leveraged her natural science communication skills and trained experience when she attended multiple Congressional Visits Days in Washington D.C., sponsored by both the Botanical Society of America and the American Institute of Biological Sciences. As a graduate student, Tanisha cultivated a relationship with Connecticut's Congressional Representative Joe Courtney. Her multiple visits to his office to communicate the importance of plants and herbaria even culminated in a visit by Courtney to the UConn herbarium! She currently serves as the Public Policy Co-Chair at the Botanical Society of America. To share her knowledge, she was an invited panelist on the Evolution Public Policy Panel hosted by the Society for the Study of Evolution. These efforts demonstrate Tanisha's commitment to leveraging her strong communication skills to press for meaningful policy change and mentor others to do the same.

Dr. Tanisha Williams is incredibly active and valued as a researcher, advocate, and communicator within the botanical community. Though still early in her career, Tanisha has made a lifelong impact through the foundation of #BlackBotanistsWeek. She has touched thousands of lives as evident by her numerous speaking engagements, the interactions with #BlackBotanistsWeek hashtags across multiple social media platforms, her dedication to inclusive education of the next generation of botanists, and her efforts to push towards meaningful policy change. Her contributions are, simply put, monumental.

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