

## July 2017 Featured Expert: *Christopher David Benda*

*This month's expert profile is from the Illinois Botanizer, who has been with a number of organizations and can be found on his Facebook page <https://www.facebook.com/illinoisbotanizer/>.*



**TPNC:** What does a typical work day look like for someone in your position?

**Benda:** It varies greatly. I do a lot of traveling throughout the state of Illinois. I conduct natural quality assessments, vegetation inventories, scientific research, and rare plant surveys. I teach PLB451, The Flora of Southern Illinois, at Southern Illinois University in the summer. I also teach a variety of classes at The Morton Arboretum as well as for the Illinois Master Naturalist program. Some days I lead adults on nature hikes through my popular wildflower walks and at Camp Ondessonk as part of the Road Scholars program. And while doing it all, I take a lot of photographs.

**TPNC:** What do you like about your job?

**Benda:** I don't have a full time salaried position and so I have to do a variety of things in order to make a living. But I wouldn't have it any other way and it's true what they say; do what you love and never work a day in your life. I love the variety and I love being my own boss (for the most part).

**TPNC:** What do you find challenging about your job?

**Benda:** There is not a lot of private demand for what I do, most people really don't care about plant conservation. That means public dollars fund a lot of the work, and state and federal funding is always being cut.

**TPNC:** What types of classes did you have to take in college to get your position?

**Benda:** Most of my knowledge is self-



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taught. In college, you learn how to learn so I don't think it really matters what classes one takes, all that is needed is the passion to excel. But I did make a concerted effort to take "ology" courses so I could learn the basics of plant and animal identification.

**TPNC:** What is your favorite aspect of nature?

**Benda:** My favorite sites to botanize in Illinois are Illinois Beach Nature Preserve in the north and Cave Creek Glade Nature Preserve in the south. And for central Illinois I would say Weston Cemetery Prairie Nature Preserve. They all have tremendous diversity and are different types of prairie: sand prairie, black soil prairie, and limestone hill prairie.



**TPNC:** What is the biggest misconception you would like the public to know about what you do?

**Benda:** I am not a gardener. I study and admire native plants in their natural setting and that does not mean I have tons of plants in my house or that I know how to grow them.

*Thanks to Christopher for sharing your very interesting career!*