How to Write a Plant Collections Policy

by Gerard T. Donnelly and William R. Feldman, for the AABGA Plant Collections Committee

Botanical gardens and arboreta are museums of living plant collections. As such, certain policies and procedures used for museums are also appropriate for use in gardens and arboreta. The most significant of these is the collections policy. A collections policy is a carefully written document that contains operational guidelines about the nature and purpose of the collection(s), acquisition, records, care and evaluation of the collections, and access. These itemized policy areas are based on the mission statement of the institution and on appropriate principles of collections management.

The nature and value of collections policies have been discussed elsewhere. Three excellent sources of information are the July 1986 issue of *The Public Garden* on plant collections, especially the article edited by Lucy Jones, "Collections Policy: The Basics;" the *1984 Longwood Program Seminars* publication concerning collections; and a copyrighted article by Marie Malaro, "Guidelines for Preparing a Collections Management Policy for a Botanical Garden or Arboretum."[1] Collections policies from other gardens can also be useful models for reference.

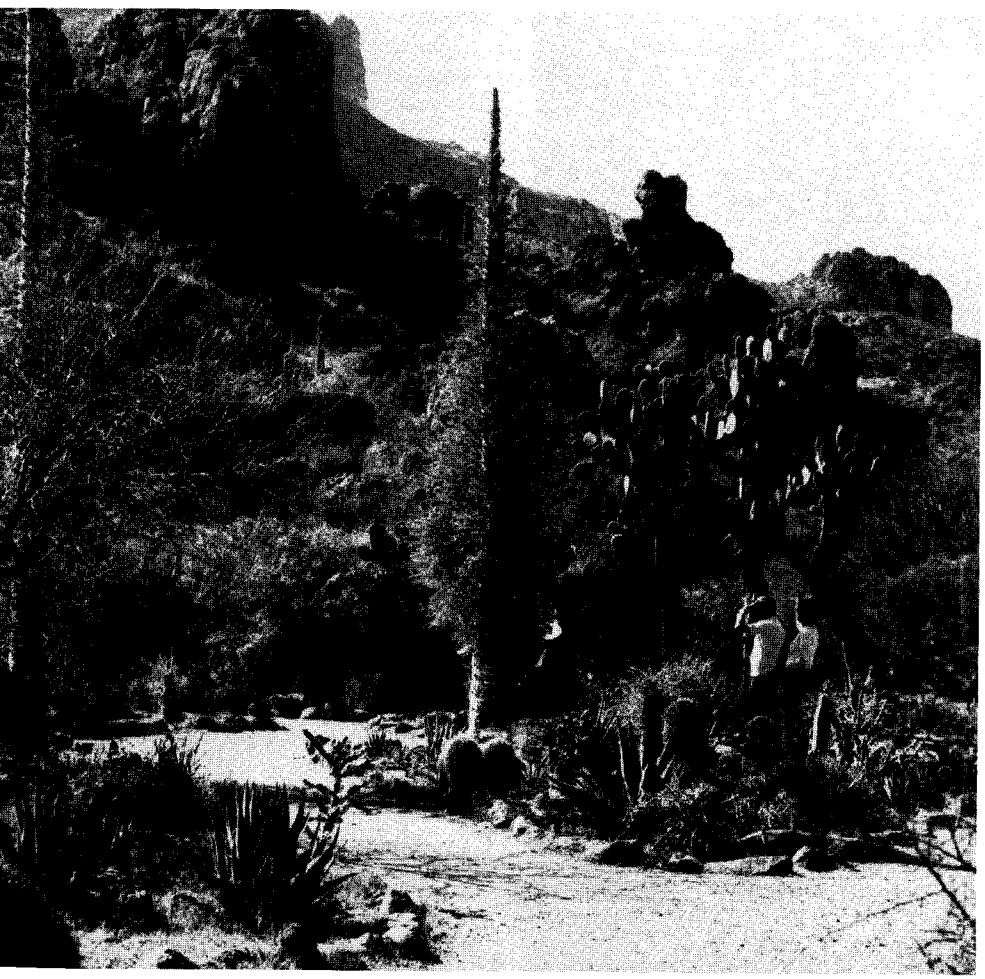
We will assume that you are already aware of collections policies and have been convinced that your institution should develop one. The purpose of this how-to guide is to help you construct a policy by asking you a series of questions, the answers to which will *be* your collections policy, at least in a rudimentary form. It will be up to you to tailor your policy to the peculiarities of your institution, its mission and your collections.

Our purpose is to help you construct policy statements, not develop procedures necessary to implement the policy. The perception that collections policies are difficult and complex to develop seems to stem from the challenging task of specifying, clarifying or developing procedural details. Strict separation of policy from procedure will facilitate creation of the collections policy, keeping the emphasis on strategy and operational principles rather than on tactics or procedures of implementation. Procedures can be developed and appended later or, better yet, reserved to a separate procedures manual.

The first step in the creation of a collections policy is to decide who will be involved in its development. Certain individuals may be responsible for initial development of a draft proposal, and others may be involved later in review and revision. Evaluate your own administrative structure and identify those who should approve and adopt the policy. Involve everyone who may be affected by the policy. All should be aware of and be committed to the process. Include a dated statement indicating approval at the highest policy level: "Approved by . . . on . . ."

We hope that the simplicity of these guidelines will prompt you to develop a collections policy that will guide your institution in the development of its collections.

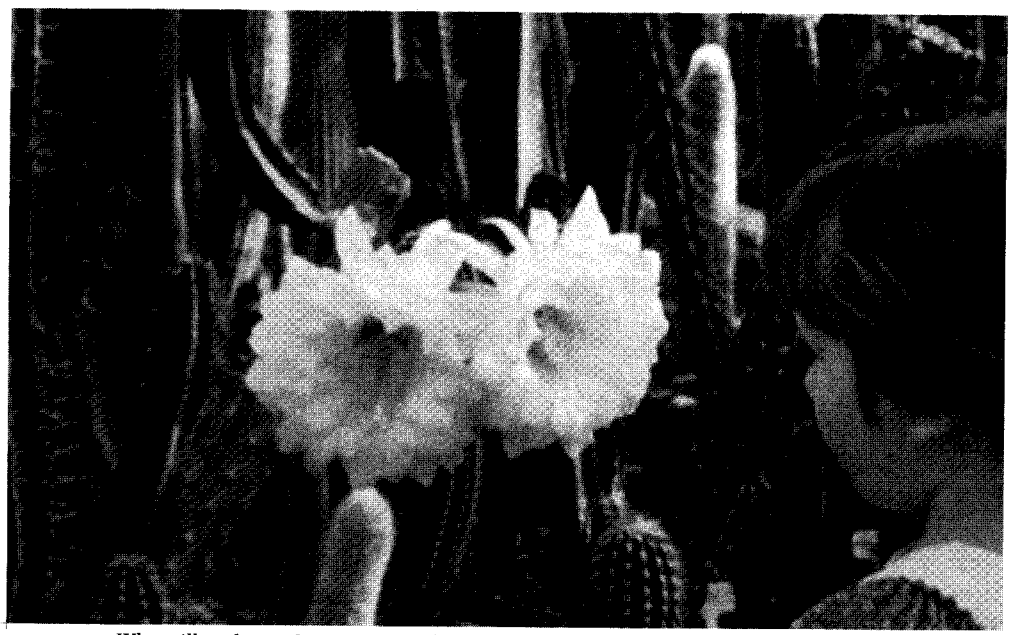
Participation in the Museum Assessment Program II (MAP II) through the Institute of Museum Services can also be of value to institutions that are considering the development of a collections policy. MAP II is a specialized consultancy that focuses on collections care and management, including collections policies. This independent review can also benefit those who have already developed a collections policy by providing an objective critique of what has already been developed.



*One purpose of a plant collection is the ability to excite wonder and interest. These Boojum trees (*Fouquieria columnaris*) in the Cactus Gardens at the Boyce Thompson Arboretum in Superior, AZ, were early acquisitions to the collection that needed long-term planning to realize.*

GERARD DONNELLY

A staff member of the Beal Botanical Garden at Michigan State University fills a seed request from a botanical garden in Czechoslovakia. Seed exchange is an important means of acquiring plants that would otherwise be unavailable.



Who will evaluate plants in the collection? Their value as public display plants may figure prominently. This Trichocereus schickendantzii *redeems its unremarkable vegetative aspect when it blooms in spring and summer.*
Shown below is plant care at the Chicago Botanic Garden in Glencoe, IL.

GERARD DONNELLY

Introduction

Define the purpose of your collections policy.

Provide a general statement about your goal to guide and limit what is collected and to practice proper collections management. Include any appropriate legal and ethical statements, such as obligations of an endowment or references to collections as part of the public trust.

Who is responsible for the implementation, interpretation and periodic review and revision of the policy?

The roles of the director, curator and other pertinent staff members should be established here. A collections committee may be appropriate to handle collections concerns. The membership of such a committee, where appropriate, could be described here.

Purpose

What is the overall purpose of the collections as related to the institution's mission?

This should be drawn from the fundamental organizing documents of the institution, e.g., charter, bylaws, mission statement. If there is more than one type of collection, the purpose of each may be described separately. Throughout the policy, specific reference to the different types of collections may have to be made as appropriate.

Acquisition

What are the criteria for selecting additions to the collections?

Plant acquisitions must relate to the purposes or themes of the collections and particular subcollections. Stringent criteria for acceptance may be necessary to limit the unwarranted accumulation of plants and the consequent drain on resources. The possible and necessary scope of the collections should be indicated. The origin or source of plants may be important; identify the types of sources that may be considered (e.g., collected in the wild, exchange, purchase, gifts). Documentation of the source may also be a critical criterion for acquisition. Priorities for acquisition and source may be included. Your institution must be able to conserve and maintain the acquisition responsibly (don't bite off more than you can chew).

Who is responsible for initiating acquisitions to the collections? Who is responsible for approval?

What are the ethical and legal considerations to be adhered to in collecting?

Plant conservation issues should be addressed. Will you ensure that purchased plants have not been illegally collected or imported? Consider endangered species laws both here and abroad and any other regulations on collection, trade and transport of plants from the wild. Even for plants that are not officially protected, how will your purchasing practices encourage nursery propagation rather than collecting from the wild?

Plant collecting by your institution should have well-defined guidelines. Consider the impact on natural populations and how to minimize it (e.g., collecting seeds or propagules vs. whole plants). Also consider the potential impact of introductions from exotic sources (such as weediness or aggressive competition with native species, disease, pests, toxicity), or even the genetic mixing from nonnative sources.

Under what conditions, if any, will the institution accept gifts or loans?

In general, if gift or loan plants are to be accepted, their acceptance should be subject to the same selection criteria as other acquisitions. Generally, gifts should be unconditional as to the eventual disposition of the plant. Who approves these acquisitions? Appraisals of the value of donated plants by your institution is restricted by tax law. What is your policy on appraisal of gifts?

Plant Records System

Describe your institution's commitment to a plant records system.

A simple statement is all that is required here, such as "(Institution Name) is committed to maintaining a comprehensive plant records system."

Who is responsible for the administration and accuracy of the plant records system?

What items of the collections are to be accessioned?

Accessioning, as contrasted with acquisition, is the act of including the plant as a permanent part of the collections, particularly as part of the plant records. The timeliness of accessioning is a policy issue that may also be addressed here, but procedural details should appear elsewhere. The issue of what constitutes an accessionable item (as in the case of propagated plants) may also be considered.

What types of materials, if any, are not to be accessioned?

Examples might include plants for sale, membership distribution and temporary educational purposes.

What essential categories of information will be maintained for each item of the collection?

Do not attempt to list all possible categories of information here (this is best reserved for your procedures document). Minimum categories, however, are a matter of policy. These might include species name, accession number, source, date acquired, and location. Other data may also be kept on certain plants. Herbarium voucher specimens provide documentation and critical information

Over two miles of nature trails wind through the grounds of the Boyce Thompson Southwestern Arboretum. This portion of the Main Loop Trail passes through the outdoor cactus garden where large specimens of cacti and other succulents are interplanted among arid-land trees and shrubs.

on the plants that are grown.

Who has responsibility for the periodic inventory of the collections?

Inventory refers to checking the existence of the plant in the collections and confirming plant records data about it. See the section on evaluation below for contrast.

Care of the Collections

What minimum standards of care are to be applied to the various collections of the institution?

Plant health and appearance are primary considerations, as are safety and liability concerns. Reserve details of maintenance procedures for a procedures manual. Indicate if certain collections or plants have priority for care over others, such as rare, endangered and threatened species.

What is the institution's commitment to safeguarding the collections and collections records?

Make a simple statement, such as: "(Institution Name) will take all reasonable measures to secure the plant collections and collections records from loss or harm." Reserve details of security and risk management for your procedural guidelines.

Evaluation

What provisions will be made for the ongoing evaluation of the collections?

Regular evaluation assures continued relevance to the stated purpose of the collections. Indicate who will be involved in collections evaluation and how frequently this will occur. Recommendations for maintenance, repropagation or deaccessioning may come from evaluation.

Deaccessioning and Disposal

What criteria are necessary to warrant deaccessioning an item from the collection?

These might include plant death, disappearance or deterioration, lost identification or authenticity, and loss of relevance or usefulness to the purposes of the collection.

What restrictions apply, if any, to the deaccessioning of a collection item?

Deaccessioning of significant plants (e.g., endangered plants, heritage cultivars of archival importance) should be restricted until their status elsewhere can be determined. Questions of ownership or stipulations of a bequest may be important considerations.

Plants like these species of Lithops *from Africa have a very different set of horticultural conditions to be met. Some* Lithops *species are threatened or endangered in their native habitats.*

Who must review and approve deaccessioning recommendations?

What principles govern disposal of deaccessioned material?

Donation or exchange with kindred institutions may have priority over selling. Who has priority if sold, donated or exchanged? Are plants to be destroyed if disposal criteria are not met? How may rare, threatened and endangered species be disposed?

Access to Collections

Who may use and have access to the various collections and collections records and for what purposes?

Will there be a charge for copying records?

Will loans of plants be made?

If so, to whom and under what circumstances? How can proper care be assured? What obligations are to be imposed if plants are lost or damaged? What is the policy about ownership of propagules?

Are propagules from plant collections to be taken and by whose authority?

Who must approve special access requests?

Gerard T. Donnelly is Curator of the W. J. Beal Botanical Garden and Campus Woody Plant Collections at Michigan State University in East Lansing and is Chairman of the AABGA Plant Collections Committee. William R. Feldman is Director of the Boyce Thompson Southwestern Arboretum in Superior, Arizona, and is also a member of the Plant Collections Committee.

Endnotes

1. Available from Marie Malaro, George Washington University, Academic Center T215, Washington, DC 20052.