

Collections Policy:

T H E B A S I C S

"If we would know where we are and whither we are tending, we could then better judge what to do and know how to do it."

Abraham Lincoln

The ultimate purpose of a collections policy is to guide and limit what a museum collects so that its collections are meaningful and relevant to the mission of the institution. An effective collections policy not only guides the everyday management of collections but also helps to define and clarify an institution's goals and purposes. Even though collections form the backbone of museums, their significance to institutional goals are sometimes overlooked. Both the process of formulating a policy and the written policy itself help to articulate the purposes and goals of an institution's



Golden Barrel Cacti at Desert Botanical Garden, Phoenix, AZ.

collections for the staff, trustees and public.

Policies and the process of creating policies can improve internal communication by bringing problems to light and organizing networks for mutual understanding. Staff guidelines establish accountability and help employees understand how their jobs relate to the

collections. In making a public statement of expected conduct, these guidelines can also protect the institution, its board and its staff from certain legal liability, such as alleged misuses of donated collections.

Despite the benefits, many cultural institutions are remiss in developing effective and comprehensive collections policies. Few public gardens have collections policies, and many of those that do have accession policies rather than comprehensive management policies. What are the issues and problems that cause only 35 percent of the gardens in the American Association of Botanical Gardens and Arboreta to have anything even

resembling a collections management policy?

One common problem is the failure to understand that gardens are made of collections. Indeed, it is the possession of collections that distinguishes public gardens from parks, playgrounds and wilderness preserves. However, the public, the trustees and even the staff may not view the garden as a collection or see the collections as part of the institution's assets. We often think of a garden as a whole unit, rather than a collection of individual pieces.

The process of creating a policy presents a new set of problems. Writing a

The Components of an Effective Collections Policy

PURPOSE

At the outset, a collections policy should state the purpose of the document and contain a statement describing the purpose of the collections which is drawn directly from the institution's stated purposes, especially from the charter or articles of incorporation or other official documents. This initial section establishes responsibility for the administration, implementation, interpretation, periodic review and revision of the policy. The membership of a collections committee can be established here, as well as its formation, meetings, responsibilities and powers.

ACQUISITIONING

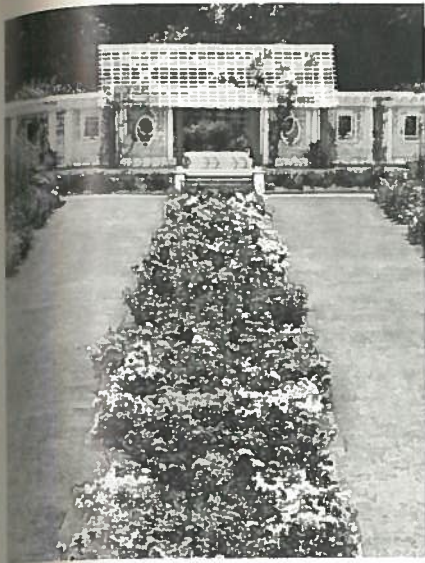
Acquisitioning describes the physical entry of a plant into the collection, whether or not the plant becomes a permanent part of that collection. Potential acquisitions should be screened and selected to serve the purposes of the institution. The collections policy should provide limitations on the kinds of plants that will satisfy those purposes and exclude peripheral and indiscriminate collecting. A good policy provides a mechanism for consistency and continuity in collections management. Criteria can be specified taxonomically, geographically, culturally, according to use or any other means appropriate to the institution. Priorities

may be established as well as responsibility for approval of acquisitions. Gifts and loans of plants should be subject to the same criteria for acquisition as purchased and field-collected plants.

ACCESSIONING

Accessioning is the formal process by which a plant becomes a permanent part of the collections and, more specifically, a part of the records. Exceptions should be clearly stated; these may include plants for sale, plants for membership distribution, plants on incoming loan and plants for temporary educational purposes.

Cranford Rose Garden, Brooklyn Botanic Garden.



policy is the unwillingness of staff to say "No!". Policies that do not establish clear limits for collecting or that allow loopholes beyond rare exceptions are almost as damaging as no policy at all.

An effective collections policy not only lays down guidelines for what plants will be collected, it also deals with all aspects of managing collections. A comprehensive collections policy should address the purpose of collections, plant records, accessioning, accessioning, inventory, horticultural evaluation, maintenance of collections, deaccessioning, disposal and access to collections for the general public, for research and for edu-

cational programs. Minimum guidelines and standards for each of these areas should be outlined. Although no museum can use another institution's collections policy with effective results, it does help to know which questions to answer and the pitfalls to avoid in writing a comprehensive, effective policy.

Edited by Lucy E. Jones, in collaboration with Nancy J. Bechtol, Lawrence E. Lee, Karen M. Perkins and Ernie G. Wasson

collections policy is a laborious, time-consuming and confrontational business which seldom produces many volunteers. When there is no shared understanding of the collection's value, policy discussions can be confusing and undirected. One of the greatest impediments to the formation and the later functioning of an effective

Accession Policy

Because living plant collections are comparatively easy and cheap to accumulate through propagation, the definition of an accession can become confused. Is it one individual plant or 100 plants derived from the same stock? Most gardens give the same identification number to all individuals of the same species or cultivar from the same source since it would prove unwieldy and unworkable to assign numbers to every individual plant in a garden.

PLANT RECORDS

Another critical section of an effective policy is the listing of the components of the plant records system and the minimal information

required of each accession and deaccession. Responsibility for the administration and accuracy of plant records should be stated, and channels for disseminating statistics derived from this data should be described. Certain plant records may be required for all accessions (e.g., accession records, deaccession records, herbarium records, inventory and mapping records) while

other additional records may be required of some accessions (e.g., evaluation records, propagation records, federal and state regulation records, field collection records, gift records). For accession, deaccession and herbarium records, minimal information should be required and so stated in the policy (e.g., botanical name, source, accession number, date of accession, status in collection and location in the garden).

EVALUATION

Regular horticultural evaluations provide a means for the continual review of the collections to assure their relevance to the purpose of the garden. A policy should determine who is responsible for evaluations and what part of the collections should be evaluated and how often. Evaluations may be done by one or more staff members or an *ad hoc* committee of qualified and interested people from inside and outside the institution.

MAINTENANCE

A policy should set responsibility for the care of collections, minimum standards for all and priority care for special groups of plants such as rare, threatened and endangered species or research collections. A maintenance procedures manual and a disaster emergency plan would be appropriate adjuncts to this section of a collections management policy.

DEACCESSIONING

Deaccessioning is distinct from plant disposal, just as accessioning is distinct from acquisition. It is the *record* of plants removed from the garden, not the actual removal. A policy should define the guidelines for deaccessioning

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Hedge wheel at Brooklyn Botanic Garden.

The Arnold Arboretum has been collecting plants for over 110 years and as a result has one of the most extensive collections of hardy temperate woody plants in North America. Approximately six years ago the Arboretum's Living Collections Committee attempted to assess where we were and where we were going with the collections. Arnold's original charter stated that we were to attempt to grow every plant hardy in the Boston, Massachusetts, area, but this was soon limited to trees, shrubs and woody vines. The collections were to be of documented wild origin, laid out in a scientific order based on the Bentham and Hooker system of plant classification and specifically useful to Harvard University in research and education. Under the original master plan developed by the first director, Charles Sargent, and the master planner, Frederick L. Olmsted, the collections were to be grouped aesthetically so that every tree group would physically intersect with the main driveway system and users interested in diversity could walk through a grove of trees reminiscent of a New England woodland.

The 1980s found the Arboretum with mature and sometimes declining tree collections and huge holdings of shrubs and vines, most of which were arranged in nursery rows rather than integrated aesthetically as understory plantings among the tree collections. The collections reflected the emphasis on collecting species and varieties during the Arboretum's first 50 years and on collecting cultivars or plants of horticultural value during the second 50 years. The primary sources of acquisition were nurseries and private collectors around the world.

In formalizing a collections policy for the Arboretum, the Living Collections Committee wanted objectives that would maintain the existing strengths of our collections, preserve the uniqueness and usefulness of the collections in 50 to 100 years, and as an allied institution of

A R N O L D

AN ACCESSION POLICY

by Gary L. Koller



Edward S. Gray

Celtis jessoensis at the Arnold Arboretum is a rare species available in few locations in North America.

Harvard University, fulfill a role appropriate to the needs of the University. After considerable discussion, the committee decided that our charter's original objectives of collecting plants of documented wild origin would best serve our role as a scientific and educational re-

source for Harvard University. We would continue to emphasize our existing strength in trees, shrubs and vines and not dilute our resources by assembling collections of herbaceous materials. Woody plants would constitute the core of our permanent collections. We also realized that it was impossible to collect and grow every woody plant potentially hardy in our geographic location. We did not have the land, staff or financial resources to allow us to do so. For genera such as *Abelia*, *Buckleya*, *Cephalotaxus*, *Koeleria*, *Neillia*, and *Xanthorrhiza*, we could collect widely and have complete holdings, for these groups are limited by what is available and potentially hardy at the Arboretum site. However, groups such as *Crataegus*, *Philadelphus*, *Ribes* and *Rubus* constituted groups larger than we could or wanted to accommodate as complete collections unless they were part of an ongoing research project. These large or taxonomically confused groups were designated as problem genera requiring guidelines to deal with special opportunities and problems. We determined that each species or variety should be represented by three accessions collected in the wild from different geographical sites and from different age groups. In locating the plants on the grounds, one individual should be a specimen plant, but the additional plants of one taxon could be massed or grouped either by themselves or with other plants.

The committee's greatest concern was to develop a policy which would define the role of cultivars in the collections including the handling of existing cultivars and future acquisitions. We decided first that cultivars would be treated as temporary collections with periodic reviews for planned deaccessioning and that we would limit and deemphasize the



A view of Arnold Arboretum.

acquisition of cultivars. However, Arnold's core of dedicated horticulturists meant that some cultivar acquisition was necessary to accommodate research, special projects and individual interests. To facilitate this, yet exercise some control, we decided that cultivars could be acquired for testing and evaluation but that each must come with a complete description of the unique character of the plant and the rationale for its acquisition and that it be connected, via the records, to the person who acquired it. In order to move from the nursery test area to the main arboretum, each plant must pass a review committee with justification for its maintenance.

Our aim is to have only the best cultivars in the holdings at a particular point in time. As the old are superseded by new, they will be reviewed and deaccessioned according to certain rules. Before deaccessioning, we should determine that the taxon is represented in public garden holdings elsewhere. If not, we should attempt to find another institution willing to perpetuate the plant, and we will provide that institution with propagation materials to insure successful continuation of the genotype. We still need to

implement this aspect for it requires staff and financial resources to work successfully.

One of the committee's primary goals is to strengthen the ability of the collections to serve a wide range of research needs. To that end, we established a set of guidelines. Depending on the funding available to support the research collection, a researcher can assemble the plant collection necessary to best accommodate the needs of a project. This research collection will not be considered part of the living collections, other than those elements which are already part of the Arboretum's permanent collections. When the research project ends, a researcher can recommend with justification that up to 10 percent of the research collection be added to the Arboretum's permanent collections. The Living Collections Committee must review and approve any proposed addition which ideally would be accompanied by funds for ongoing maintenance and curation needs.

Over the past few years we have been very successful in acquiring wild collected plants from all over the world. In fact, almost too successful, for our nursery system continually bulges at the seams. We have found that we are often duplicating the same taxon in multiple accessions which exceed our planned

needs. Until recently we lacked efficient methods to track plants through our propagation and nursery systems, and our inventories were out of date even before they were typed. In addition, our yearly accession books were listed sequentially by accession number and not alphabetically by scientific name. These two factors, combined with a situation in which several people acquire plants, resulted in too much duplication and a waste of resources. We now maintain a list of all the seeds and plants being requested from *Index Semina* or by special request. To manage our accession and nursery inventory system, we have acquired a computer which allows us to monitor what has been acquired and what is being readied for use in the permanent collections. With the new systems, we hope to reduce the effort and expense of acquiring unneeded collections materials and to project anticipated uses for each plant from the day it enters our inventory.

In terms of acquisitions, our policy is rarely to purchase or accept plants from nurseries, private collectors or other botanical gardens except for rootstocks or special landscape projects. We have many mature plants which were grown from open pollinated seeds collected from plants on our own grounds. We no longer consider open pollinated seed sources acceptable. For those plants which remain rare and difficult to acquire from wild sources, we will accept temporary holdings from other gardens until such time as we can collect wild source materials. We are attempting to limit our selections from *Index Semina* to plants accompanied by wild collection data. As we repropagate plants for replacement in our collections, we review the records to determine if we wish to continue the specific accession line or if it has or could be replaced by material of better provenance. We have worked at developing a list of *desiderata* to fill obvious deficiencies within our present holdings, and we are looking ahead 25-50 years to determine what we



Mike Dirr

Phellodendron amurense at the Arnold Arboretum.

need to replace now to preserve the future integrity of the collections.

Tightening up the accessions policy requires the establishment of a more consistent and formalized deaccession policy. Space is limited, and in order to accommodate new plantings there needs to be a more organized system for the evaluation of existing plants and plantings and an accommodation of more rapid turnover of elderly individuals. Before adding new plantings, we attempt to undertake a careful check of existing plants of the same taxon to determine if they

remain in good health, to project roughly their additional useful life-span in the collections and to see if their records are complete and of accessions quality.

We have determined that it is not in the best interests of the institution to allow plants to become overly mature. We have old trees and shrubs which should be maintained to preserve the majesty of our mature collections. However, presently we maintain too many decrepit and unexceptional plants and with them the expenses for pruning, fertility and pest control. We find ourselves with collections of *Quercus*, *Carya* and *Fagus* where the



Arnold Arboretum

Phellodendron amurense.

majority are 80–100 years. What is their additional useful life span? It is critical to mature collections that a more dynamic procedure be implemented to accommodate mixed age stands. Hard decisions need to be made in removing plants before their day is done so that space is available to accommodate the next generation or plants of better documentation.

We are attempting to maintain a balance as we move forward. In many institutions we see an aggressive policy to sponsor collecting trips to acquire new plants. We, too, desire our share of these treasures, but at the same time we have a tremendous responsibility to maintain the integrity of our first century of plant collecting. How will we maintain an even balance of acquisition and conservation should financial resources become even more strained? As we look outward to acquire new plants, let us not forget the wealth of our existing collections and to work for greater use and appreciation of these resources.

Gary L. Koller is Managing Horticulturist at The Arnold Arboretum, Jamaica Plain, MA.

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plants and establish who must approve deaccessions.

Because major deaccessions may cause controversies, they should require approval by the board of trustees or a board-appointed collections committee.

A policy might state that plants are to be deaccessioned only if they are no longer relevant to the purposes of the institution, if they have deteriorated, died or disappeared or if they have been replaced by a more desirable accession.

INVENTORY

Collection-wide inventory and map updating should be performed at regular intervals. The length of the interval depends on the size of the collection. A small growing garden needs an inventory and mapping check at least every two years. Larger more established gardens may find it redundant to inventory more frequently than every five years. Regardless of the intervals of garden-wide checking, updating must occur continuously to be effective (i.e., accessions and deaccessions are marked as they occur).

DISPOSAL

Once a plant has been deaccessioned, it may be necessary to decide how to dispose of it. It may be sold, donated, exchanged or destroyed. Who, if anyone, will receive priority if it is to be sold, donated or exchanged? What will be done with monies derived from such sales?

ACCESS AND USE

A policy should outline the intended and proper use of the collections. Who has access to them, when and under what cir-

cumstances? Should there be access to the grounds for weddings, special events and the handicapped? Who should have access to plant records and plant material? A written policy should establish general guidelines to ensure the protection and security of the collections and facilities in all circumstances.

Nancy Bechtol is the Integrated Pest Management Specialist at Longwood Gardens, Kennett Square, PA; Lucy Jones directs the Education Department at the Brooklyn Botanic Garden, Brooklyn, NY; Lawrence Lee is the Director of Horticulture at the Staten Island Botanical Garden, NY; Karen Perkins is the Education Coordinator at the Worcester County Horticultural Society, Worcester, MA; and Ernie Wasson superintends the Green Animals Topiary Garden in Portsmouth, RI.