



Core Collections: Focusing and Prioritizing the Living Collections

As the guardians of our gardens and the plants within them, we acknowledge multiple responsibilities: to build useful collections of known documented origin, to display the art of horticulture, to maintain plants in optimum health, and to minimize waste to remain fiscally responsible. This task is complex. The dynamic of creating collections useful for display, conservation, research, and education must be carefully considered to remain within the confines of space and limited resources.

Purpose

Public gardens designate Core Collections to focus efforts and achieve excellence among a manageable set of defined plant groups. These “strong suits” help define a garden’s identity and contribute directly to its mission. Their designation formally acknowledges an organization’s long-term commitment to their prioritized care and development. This process of delineating Core Collections helps align education, interpretation, conservation, display, and research activities creating efficiencies and maximizing programmatic impact.

Process

The process of designating Core Collections is no small task. It often includes all staff of a garden and must be approved by several layers of leadership. To build high value collections deliberately requires long range planning, assessment, and strategic decision-making to focus efforts across departments. The most successful curatorial planning documents are fully vetted by the leadership team and approved by the governing body.

How to Get Started

We suggest that a garden begin by polling the staff. Ask for suggestions of plant groups or collections that demonstrate the essence of the garden, are well suited to its growing conditions, and can be realistically developed given available space and workforce. Assess each plant group using the **Collections Prioritization Worksheet** developed by **Plant Collections Network**. This tool provides metrics grouped under four categories: Scope, Documentation, Use, and Management. These categories align with the Network’s **Compass for Progress: Standards of Excellence for Plant Collections Management**. Each plant group can be assigned a numeric value for how well it performs in these categories. The resulting total scores for each plant group will provide a means to assess its relative merits for inclusion into the Core Collections.