**Accessioning your collection**

Accessioning is a method of cataloguing and keeping track of your plant collection. There are alternative ways of doing this and you may find one suits you better than any other, but the essential point is to keep accurate records in some way. This ensures not only that you, but any other future owners of your plants know what they are and where they came from.

You may think on building up a National Collection that you know your plants intimately, that no detail will ever escape your attention. Regrettably, in this you would be wrong! No matter how long you have held plants, it is guaranteed that eventually you will forget some detail of their origin or history. Add to this falling under the proverbial bus and records become all the more important. This is why accessioning is vital and why all botanic gardens have an accessioning system.

The system used can vary, but all accessioning systems have one fundamental thing in common. Each individual plant can be traced from the moment it reaches your collection. Whatever happens to it from then onwards, it will always be recorded. When the plant is propagated, its offspring are then also recorded and if some of these are distributed to other collections, this is also recorded and the new custodians have a record as well. Should a plant die (and this happens to us all) this is recorded, often with the reason for loss, as this may prove useful in the future when further attempts are made to grow the same plant.

The actual system for accessioning can vary. A purely numeric system can suffice (0001 and so on), although this does not immediately convey much information unless you are familiar with the plants concerned. So quite often this number is combined with the year of acquisition (2019-0001 and so on). At the very least this immediately tells you when you received the plant, so giving an indication of its age and longevity in your collection.

It is a personal choice whether your system starts again each year, or continues the sequential number indefinitely. This choice may depend on the likely eventual size of your collection. Alternatives here might be 2019-0001, followed by 2020-0002 if a second variety is acquired a year later and you are retaining a single set of sequential numbers. Or the same new plant would be 2020-0001 if you re-start the sequence each year. Whatever method you choose to catalogue your plants, make sure you stick to the system you select.

Alternatively, you may choose to use an alphanumeric system, combining letters and numbers (such as N0001 and so on). The letter here refers to “north” but could be any relevant code. It may be that a collection is distributed between more than one garden, in which case a letter might be valuable to immediately show which garden the plant is held in. Combining an alphanumeric with the year would again give more information at a glance (such as 2019-N0001).

Don’t change your system part way through as this causes no end of confusion. Let us cite the accession system at Kew Gardens to explain why. In common with many botanic gardens, Kew used “entry books” for many years, where the plants were catalogued by batch number, by year of acquisition and by sequence number. So, the fourth plant of the first batch of plants acquired in 1974 would bear the number 01-74-0004. Inherently, this gave information about the batch (a set of plants received from a single donor) the year of accession and the order in which they were received. However, when the system was computerised this proved too complex for sorting and did not deal with the impending change of century. The system was simplified to the year of acquisition and a sequence number (in this example 1974-0004). Since Kew has engraved labels on all its plants, and these last for many years, the two systems ran alongside one another for a long period, confusing visitors and new members of staff alike.

Plant Heritage provides a tailor-made web based accessioning system - Persephone. This should be the default choice of accessioning system for new National Collections, unless you have strong objections to using it. This might be the case where building up a National Collection in a botanic garden or other institute where there is already a well-established accessioning system.

Another thing to bear in mind, and to settle on before your collection grows, is what to do about propagation. For annuals, in particular, it will rapidly become very confusing and cause extra work if new accession numbers are created for each generation of plants. It is usual to retain the same accession number for the seed raised generations of plants of an annual plant, or of a perennial variety that is normally seed raised and stays true.

Where seed raised plants are produced for a perennial cultivar that is known to be variable, or unstable, then giving these new numbers as they are raised is wise. This avoids incorrectly named plants potentially working their way back into horticulture. After all, that is the whole point of National Collections and Plant Heritage, to save and preserve rare and correctly named cultivars.

On this point, you should always record the name your plants arrived under, but have a system that allows for this to be changed as and when you find the correct name of the cultivar. The “incorrect” name should be retained in some way, so that this is recorded and the supplier can be told of their error. This is the process of verification.