





# INDIANA HISTORICAL SOCIETY COLLECTIONS ADVISOR

A RESOURCE FROM IHS LOCAL HISTORY SERVICES

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## APRIL SHOWERS BRING MAY FLOWERS

By Karen DePauw, coordinator, IHS Local History Services

But how can museums protect and preserve the May flowers that end up in their collections? There are different types of flora and fauna specimens within museum collections. Some were prepared by a specialist who may have used chemicals to preserve the plants, while others were prepared by an individual who might have simply slipped a favorite flower between the pages of a diary and relied on the weight of the closed book to press and preserve it.



[Floral Display](#). (Bass Photo Co Collection, Indiana Historical Society)

Collections of preserved flora and fauna that were created by specialists with the idea of preserving them for future scientific research are often housed in what is known as an herbarium. These specimens often feature specific information that is captured when the plant is first found and catalogued in the field, such as the name, location it was found, when it was found, the reason for its collection, and even the techniques for preparation. Although history museums may find these types of specimens in their collections, they primarily deal with flora and fauna collected by amateurs or by individuals simply looking to preserve something with special meaning to them.

Regardless of how and why they were initially collected, flora and fauna in museum collections require some special treatment. A major issue with flora and fauna collections is the inherent desirability of these things to pests. Integrated pest management is as important, if not more so,



### ONLINE RESOURCES

[NPS Museum Handbook Appendix O: Curatorial Care of Natural History Collections](#)  
(National Park Service)

[Introduction to the Herbarium](#)  
(The Illinois State Museum)

[Botanical Collections](#)  
(American Museum of Natural History)

[Care and Conservation of Natural History Collections](#)  
(National Sciences Collections Association)

### UPCOMING TRAINING AND PROGRAMS

[Care for Ornamental Iron in Historic Cemeteries](#)

May 16 - Wisconsin Historical Society webinar.

[Caring for Your Historic Globe Collection](#)

May 17 - Connecting to Collections Care webinar.

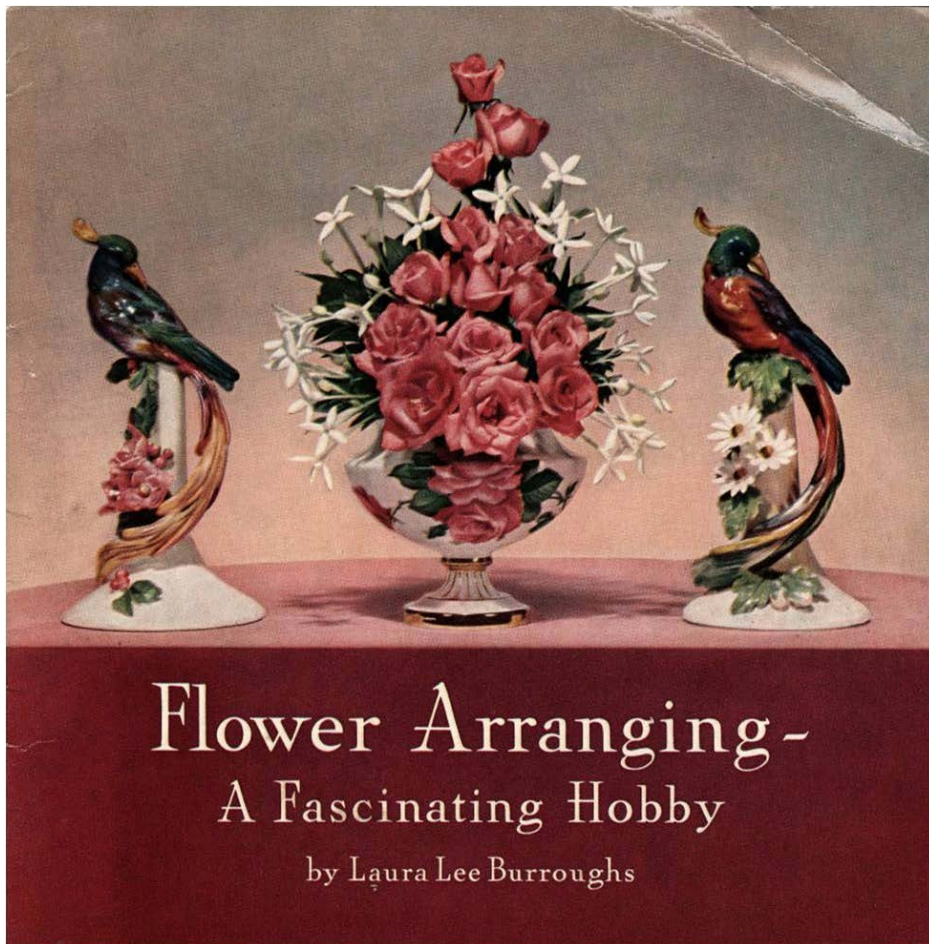
in collection segments containing natural history specimens. Noting what collection, such as the name of a specific archival collection, contains pressed flowers, plants or algae can be important as prioritizing. Checking in on these collections periodically could provide early detection of an infestation before other indicators become apparent outside of the archival box.



[Atkins Flower Shop](#). (Indiana Historical Society)

Another issue can also be changes in relative humidity and their affect on the fragility of the item. Dry plant specimens naturally retain some amount of water. If the environment the plant is stored in has drastic and constant shifts in relative humidity the plant may lose this water and become increasingly brittle. It may also experience expansion and contraction which may cause it to split and become even more delicate. Additionally, too much water in the specimen beyond what was naturally retained when dried, can cause an increased potential for fungal growth on the specimen.

Besides keeping an eye out for dramatic shifts in relative humidity and the infestation of pests, specimens are naturally very brittle because they have been dried. Make sure to support them when moving or examining them by placing them on a piece of rigid board, in a box, or on a tray. Also, always store items lying down, whether they are enclosed in a book or loose specimens, storing them flat will help diminish the potential of breakage due to storage.



Booklet, "[Flower Arranging: A Fascinating Hobby.](#)" 1940. (Indiana Historical Society)

When natural specimens are found in the collection, there are different ways to label these items depending on how they are stored. If the specimen is mounted on a paper or board, or is mounted in a scrapbook or album, simply label the mount with a number using a soft, number 2 pencil. If the item is in a book, consider placing a buffer page between the item and the facing page in order to protect the facing page from staining due to pressing against the specimen. If the item is a free-floating specimen and is large enough, use an acid-free tag that can be loosely tied to the item. Note that this can only be done with sturdy items, such as branches or dried items with sturdy stems. For delicate detached items, place them carefully into a polypropylene bag or other clear archival enclosure, with a small segment of board if needed to provide some stability, and write the number either on the board or on a tag kept in the bag with the item. If the specimen will be placed in a bag and then the bag placed within the pages of a book to keep the specimen where it was found, it can still be a good idea to include the number in with the specimen in order to put the two back together if they are ever separated.

Finally, note that if the museum ever chooses to loan an item that includes a natural specimen there are specific rules and laws regulating how plant specimens can be transported across state lines. Usually established to eliminate the risk of transporting invasive plants and insects to other locations, these rules can apply to historical specimens as well. Before transporting an item of this type for loan to another institution or sale, make sure the museum is aware of all applicable laws.

Pressed flowers and plants in museum collections can help make connections to the world of those who collected them. Whether tucked in scrapbooks or carefully mounted and catalogued for research, these items draw together history and the natural world from the past to the present.

This is a free publication. Anyone may subscribe.

[Local History Services](#)

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