

Collecting and Pressing Rangeland Plant Guide

Adapted from the University of Idaho's Rangeland Ecology & Management Professor, Dr. Karen Launchbaugh's "Collecting and Mounting Rangeland Plants"

Healthy rangeland ecosystems are characterized by a diversity of native plants that provide forage for livestock and wildlife, hold soil, and yield clean water. Recognizing plant species is important to monitor forage resources, manage potentially toxic plants, identify weedy species, and simply enjoy nature. Therefore, plant identification is a necessary skill for range management and enjoyment. Pressed and dried plant specimens are useful teaching aids and references for plant identification.

Collecting Plants

Select plants that are average. Do not collect diseased, atypical (unique), or unusual specimens. For best results in identifying plants, an actively growing plant in the flowering or fruiting stage is necessary. When collecting, remember that you will only need enough plant material to put on a 4 by 6 press. That isn't very much.

Herbaceous plants such as grasses, forbs, and sedges should be collected to include the whole plant and some of the root material. If the plant is very large, collect seed head and a section of basal leaves. For woody plants, a typical branch, preferably with fruit or flowers, should be cut cleanly.

Remove excessive dead material and shake dirt from roots. Then, place in a plastic bag. Inside the bag, place a wet rag or paper towel to keep roots moist and limit wilting of the plant.

Record general location, habitat, soil type, and topography in your field journal, also enter the name of the plant if you know it.

The details needed in your notebook depend on the reason you are collecting plants. If you are just collecting for fun or to make decorative items, you may not need to record anything. On the other hand, if you are collecting reference specimens for positive identification, you will need to include exact location, habitat, associated species, and even color of flowers or fruits. An easy way to keep track of plants is to record a number for each plant and put the number with the plant when you press it.

Pressing and Drying Plants

Press plants as soon as possible after collecting. Some plants wilt very quickly, especially on hot days.

Start with the plant press frame and put on one sheet of cardboard. Place index card over plant.

Grab a plant you collected, clean off roots and divide plant until an appropriate amount of plant material remains. That's right, keep ripping apart the plant until you have just enough material to put on the piece index card. The most common mistake of novice plant collectors make is to press too much plant material.

Arrange each plant on the newspaper as naturally as possible. With tall plants, it is necessary to fold the stem(s) to get it in the press. Repeat this sequence for each plant.

When all plants are in the press, put the top press frame over the plants and place the rubber bands firmly on the press. As the plants dry you may need to tighten the press. You can tie the press tightly with small ropes or strong string.