

Collecting Natural Materials

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A walk outdoors will easily provide subjects to draw and paint. A single fallen leaf, a twig, interesting grasses or an insect or butterfly can be a wonderful study or part of a well planned composition. Put a few zip lock bags in your pocket when you go out, keep small containers of bottled water in the car and keep a penknife handy.



When you walk in the woods or along a country road look down and keep an eye out for a bit of color or shape that interests you. Much of the nature you bring indoors will fade quickly so plan to draw and study it immediately. Some subjects can be effectively preserved by drying or pressing for use later but drawings made with newly collected materials will hold more of your memories of where and how they grew or were found.

CAUTION! Be careful when you are bringing materials indoors. Keep specimens in a tray or plastic bag as you work. Mushrooms (especially the white ones) are often poisonous and can cause permanent injury if the tiny spores get into a soft drink at your elbow. Be sure to handle mushrooms cautiously and wash your hands thoroughly when you have finished.

Garden Flowers

Try to pick flowers early in the day before the sun is too hot. Use a sharp knife or scissors and cut plenty of stem. Plunge the flowers immediately into distilled water. Zip type plastic bags are useful for flowers. A basket with several zip bags and a container of water and penknife is a convenient collecting kit. You can pour a little water in the zip bags, put in flower materials and fill the space with air before zipping it closed. The resulting pillow will keep the plant damp and protected if carefully stored.

If you want to handle the flowers while you draw or paint them, wrap a wet paper towel around the cut end of the stem and then use a plastic sandwich bag to keep your hands dry. The small plastic containers that florists use for corsages or arrangements are useful to allow the flower to be handled conveniently. To keep flowers fresh, be sure the vases or containers have been cleaned thoroughly with bleach and don't use tap water.

Wildflowers

PLEASE do not cut or pick rare wildflowers! Try to draw or paint on location if the plant is rare. Even not so rare wildflowers should be handled gently whenever possible. The delicate wild lady slipper orchids are very common in my studio yard but I would never cut one to paint. Since I want to have a close look at set of leaves and stem anyway, I usually dig up a likely subject to take it into the studio. I can keep it in a container for a few days while I study, draw and paint it, and then return it to its native habitat when I'm done.

Roadside wildflowers can be collected in a bucket of water but most will not look good for long. Morning glory flowers will die immediately after being cut no matter how hard you try to keep them. I solve this

problem by pulling up a long vine and float the whole mass on the water in a bucket. Although the first flowers will die, the next morning there will be a fresh new crop of blooms to draw as the buds open. This works for many flowers. Although the later opening flowers are often smaller, they sometimes continue for many days.

Drying and Pressing

Some materials are dry when you find them. Fallen leaves, if collected dry, may lose some of their color, but will retain the interestingly curled and folded shapes. You can dry flowers with silica gel, a white powder, from a craft store or garden center. A plastic food storage container with a tight fitting lid, especially a wide and shallow one, is excellent for drying. When you first buy the silica gel and once or twice a year thereafter pour the silica gel in a metal cake pan and let it sit in the oven at a very low heat (250) for several hours. This will allow any moisture in the gel to evaporate. When cool, pour the gel in a container.

When you collect flowers to dry, nestle them in the powder and gently pour more of the gel around and in between petals, burying the flower. When you finish put the lid on tightly and set the container in a cool place for several days or a week.

Pressing flowers or leaves is a time honored way to preserve them. A large heavy catalog is a perfect method, although drying presses and more sophisticated equipment is available. Ferns and leaves do very well pressed, and when dry can be glued into a blank sketchbook for later reference

Insects and Butterflies

The colorful butterflies are favorite subjects in nature art and they are among the easiest of specimens to preserve. Have a large jar with a tight lid handy before you set out. Soak a cotton ball in shellac thinner and put it in the jar. Crumple a dry piece of paper towel and set it in the jar to keep the insect

from bumping into the cotton ball.

Before the butterfly has been dead long, take it out of the jar and gently shape it into a natural position. Lay the butterfly, wings slightly spread, upside down on a tent of folded index card and let it harden into position. Insects such as bumble bees, grasshoppers, dragonflies or strange beetles are often good subjects in nature art. Most insects are very easy to dry and keep.

Birds, feathers and Nests

On occasion a bird flies into my studio window and breaks his neck or I find a recently dead one in the garden. It is against federal law to collect many birds without a special permit or even to keep feathers you find on the ground, especially if they are eagle or other rare birds. I often paint the things I find although I try not to keep them very long. When painting from a recently (or frozen) specimen, keep it in the zip lock bag to prevent handling it.

Nests are another matter of course. Every year the winds blow abandoned nests from the trees and the collected nests will last a very long time with moderate care. Birds eggs are best subjects as broken shells since it implies that the bird has hatched and is happily on his way. The shells can be stored in small boxes filled with cotton but do have a tendency to lose some color when stored a long time.

Drawing and painting from nature is rewarding. A walk outdoors is good exercise, the beauty of nature is soothing, and collecting and preserving specimens is fun. The best subjects to paint are those quickly collected and taken to the studio while the memory of their original setting is fresh in your mind, but dried, pressed and preserved items are useful reference later.

Collect no more than you have use for, respect property rights and the ecology. Some of your respect and experience with nature will show in your art.