MASSWILDLIFE

DIVISION OF
FISHERIES & WILDLIFE

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Guidelines for Rare Plant Collecting in Massachusetts

Oversight on rare plants in Massachusetts is in the Division of Fisheries and Wildlife (MassWildlife) within the Natural Heritage & Endangered Species Program (NHESP). Please see our primary webpage for detailed information and permits. This can be found at www.mass.gov/nhesp.

1. Be aware of the "Massachusetts Endangered Species Act" (Mass. General Law, Chapter 131A), its regulations (321 CMR 10:00), and what species occur on the current regulatory list of endangered, threatened and special concern species (321 CMR 10:60). It is necessary to have a permit from MassWildlife to collect state-protected species, including any seeds, fruits or other plant parts.

2. Obtain a necessary collecting permit from the Division of Fisheries and Wildlife. Permits may be issued for certain scientific, educational or conservation purposes. Please see https://www.mass.gov/lists/natural-heritage-forms-and-guidelines and then scroll to "Collection Permit Applications." There are two types of permits: a Scientific Collection Permit for collections associated with research and/or education, and a Commercial Scientific Collection Permit for consultants doing business or other commercial endeavors.

3. Even when permitted, collect only when it is important to do so for scientific, educational or conservation purposes. For instance, collecting one or a few plants to document a new state, county, town or site record is more justifiable than taking one or more additional specimens from a previously documented area. If you are doing a botanical survey, consult with the Natural Heritage & Endangered Species Program (NHESP Botanist or Database Manager) to determine what rare plant species are already known from the survey area. Release of site specific location information is restricted and is only provided when justification is presented in writing, but lists of rare species known for each town are available on the web at https://www.mass.gov/info-details/rare-species-viewer. Besides these Guidelines, we advise all researchers to follow the "Guidelines for Ethical Field Research on Rare Plant Species" prepared by Dr. Elizabeth Farnsworth for the New England Wild Flower Society. Please see https://www.mass.gov/doc/guidelines-for-ethical-field-research-on-rare-plant-species/download.

4. Collect a whole plant or seeds only if there are >100 individuals in the population. For herbarium vouchers this should be done when the plant's identity is most apparent, e.g., when the plant is in flower or fruit. If more than one individual is needed, the number requested should correspond to the population's ability to sustain the taking without causing a detectable decrease in its size or area during subsequent years. If collecting seeds from perennial species for conservation purposes, collect no more than 10% of available seed from any one individual plant and no more than 10% of seed available from the entire population. Be sure to randomize collection, not just the tallest, biggest or prettiest plants, and collect only at a time when the seeds are fully mature. Collecting seed from annual or biennial species requires a consultation with the state botanist prior to collection.

5. When numbers range from 10—100 individuals, take only a diagnostic portion of the plant, such as a flowering or fruiting branch, to document an important occurrence not previously vouchered. The rarer the species and/or the smaller the population, the more conservative you should be in sampling. In many cases, a single leaf, flower or fruit, especially when accompanied by a good photograph or two, will be adequate proof of identification. When taking tissue samples from small populations, sampling should be designed to minimize the likelihood of any mortality to individual plants. Do not collect seed from these small populations for conservation purposes unless specifically under our written guidance.

6. When numbers are less than 10, take only photographs to document the species presence.

7. File a Rare Plant Observation Form detailing all collection activity (including a listing of all species taken, number of specimens taken of each, and the disposition of same) at the termination of the permit period with MassWildlife's Permit Office and NHESP. Submission of "Rare Plant Observation Forms" with updates on any rare plant populations observed or sought, and copies of any research reports or publications associated with the permitted activities should be sent to the Database Manager at the NHESP address in Westborough. Online reports are preferred and can be completed using MassWildlife's HeritageHub. See https://www.mass.gov/info-details/heritage-hub-overview. There you will find all the necessary information to report online. This online system also allows you to see all of your reports submitted over time. These reports are the foundation of the work of NHESP, and this type of data collection is an important benefit to the Commonwealth resulting from permitted activities.

8. For other botanical questions contact the Natural Heritage & Endangered Species Program.

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