NATURE STUDY—No. XV.

HOW TO COLLECT AND PRESERVE PLANTS.

By W. T. MACOUN, Horticulturist, Central Experimental Farm, Ottawa, Ont.

While Nature Study does not necessarily involve the accumulation of natural history specimens for the purpose of forming a herbarium, a collection of insects or of bird skins, the making of a collection is undoubtedly of great value both as a means of bringing the student into closer contact and more intimate acquaintance with natural objects, and of inducing a continued and well directed study of them. If one decides to make a collection, it is of the greatest importance that he begin in the right way. It frequently happens that young people, and adults as well, in their enthusiasm, begin collections ; but, through ignorance of the best methods of collecting and preserving their specimens, these are improperly made, or, through not knowing the way to preserve them, are soon destroyed by insects, and the collector's enthusiasm is dampened. It is then difficult to get him to start again.

It was felt by the Council of the Ottawa Field Naturalists' Club that very useful work would be accomplished by giving a demonstration of the best methods of collecting and preserving natural history specimens so that anyone who wished to begin a collection might do so in the right way. Accordingly, a special meeting of the Club was held on April 26th, 1904, and demonstrations were given by experts in various branches of science. Mr. A. G. Kingston described his methods of observing and identifying birds with a field glass. Dr. Jas. Fletcher spoke on the advantages of the study of Entomology. Dr. H. M. Ami discussed the collecting and preserving of geological specimens. Demonstrations were given of the mounting of plants by Miss Macoun ; of insects, by Mr. A. Gibson and Mr. W. Metcalfe ; inflating caterpillars, by Mr. C. H. Young ; preparing geological specimens, Mr. Geo. Burland.

In addition to the addresses and demonstrations already referred to, Prof. J. Macoun told how to collect, mount, and preserve botanical specimens, and, in order that as many as possible may get the information thus given by him, the most important

points with regard to collecting and preserving, are made the subject of this Nature Study article, and it is hoped that the other addresses which were given will be published also.

Prof. Macoun said that it was necessary, first of all, to have the desire to make a collection of plants before beginning the work. Unless the student had the desire, little benefit would be derived from it. A good herbarium was a proof that there had been a desire. In collecting plants, it is not very important what they are carried in while out in the field, providing they do not wilt before pressing. The lack of a tin case should not deter one from getting specimens, as a basket answers the purpose very well ; but the best practice is to put the plants when collected into the plant press at once. A trowel or a strong knife are convenient for digging up the plants ; but these again are not really indispensable, as strong fingers will dig up almost any specimen. A good plant press is a necessity, and it should be light and strong. A very strong press is made with two boards, each made of three pieces of wood nailed together. Each piece is very thin, but great strength is obtained by having the middle piece with the grain crosswise. Joined in this way the boards will stand all the pressure they will get without breaking. When taken to the field, the boards may be kept in place by means of a stout shawl strap, by which also sufficient pressure can be given. If possible, there should be two extra boards at home made of ordinary inch wood, between which the plants may be put the day after they are collected, aad pressed by means of a strong strap or some heavy weight. When one is going on a collecting trip, enough papers should be put in the press for all the specimens that are likely to be obtained ; but, the lighter the press, the better. Newspapers cut to about the size of the press or a little smaller and of a single thickness of paper are very convenient for putting the plants on, and filter paper or blotting paper for covering the specimen and to absorb the moisture.

When one is making a collection, it is well to try and obtain a typical and perfect plant of the species, as, once an inferior specimen is dried and mounted, one is not likely to get a better one, and perfect specimens add very much to the attractiveness and value of a herbarium. It is sometimes puzzling to the beginner

to know what is a good specimen, as a sheet will apparently only take a plant of a certain size. If the plant is a small one, the whole of it should be taken, the roots being carefully separated from the soil so as to injure them as little as possible. If flowers and fruit can be obtained on the same specimen, so much the better; but usually it is necessary to collect a plant when it is in full flower, and then when the fruit is nearly or quite full grown. In order to get the whole of a large plant on a sheet, it may be bent either once or twice, in order to do it. It is much better to do this than to lose the roots or root leaves, the latter especially being sometimes necessary in identifying specimens. If the stem or root of a plant is thick, it may be cut down its centre, leaving one side intact. Specimens of trees and shrubs may be made of branches a little smaller than the sheet, the important point being to get the whole of the flower cluster, if possible, and one or more well developed leaves. When a plant is laid on the piece of newspaper in the press, the temptation is to spread the leaves out carefully to prevent their creasing. This is a great mistake and many a fine specimen has been spoiled in this way. Some plants will stand such treatment, but many will not. As a rule, the most satisfactory way to do, is to lay the plant on the newspaper, placing the leaves or flowers so that the specimen will look fairly symmetrical and then without trying to take out all the creases in the leaves, put on the filter paper or blotting paper and press the specimen with the hand or between the boards if there is only one plant to put in. The next day, when the plant has wilted, some of the creases can be readily smoothed out; but, after the plant is pressed, these are not noticed nearly as much as when fresh; and, indeed, they sometimes look better, as when the under side of the leaves show here and there, it makes a pleasing contrast, and it is important also at times to show the under side of the leaf as well as the upper side. Some of the more delicate ferns may be dried with advantage between two pieces of newspaper, the drier being put on top of the newspaper. This avoids disturbing the specimen when changing the driers, as the upper piece of newspaper need not be removed until the plant is dry. The specimen when once laid on the newspaper should not be removed from it until it is dry. When a plant is wilted and not dry, it is very difficult and

sometimes impossible to replace the specimen without injuring them. An exception may be made with very succulent plants or fleshy plants, when both upper and lower papers should be changed to get rid of the moisture as soon as possible, and sometimes it is necessary to dip the plant in boiling water in order to kill it. Some plants retain their colour fairly well, even if improperly dried, but the majority lose their original colour unless they are dried quickly and properly. Plants should be dried as rapidly as possible after the first day, and in order to do this the driers should be changed at least once a day and, if possible, twice at first. After the first day or two, when the excess of moisture has been removed, the hotter the driers are, the better the results will be, and, in order to have the driers quite hot, they should be heated on or at the stove and put on the specimens at once. If it is not convenient to heat the papers in this way, they may be dried outside and not especially heated. As some plants dry much quicker than others, the best results will be obtained if a thin piece of wood is kept between the plants which are in different stages of drying, as, if this is not done, a plant which would dry very quickly is kept moist by others of a more succulent nature. Some plants will dry in two or three days, and some take nearly two weeks. One can easily tell by the touch when they are dry.

Many a collection of plants has been ruined by insects after it has been made, and the enthusiasm of the collector may die with the loss of his specimens. The poisoning of plants after they have been dried should never be neglected, and the sooner it is done, the better. One of the best formulas for this purpose is : Corrosive Sublimate 1½ drachms ; carbolic acid, 1½ drachms ; alcohol, 12 ounces. A small brush is used to apply the poison which should be painted over all the plant that is exposed, the flowers especially getting a full share, as the insects will frequently destroy the flowers when they will not injure another part. Alcohol is used instead of water, as it evaporates without leaving a stain on the paper.