

Growing a Topical or Thematic

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Whether you are forming a completely new collection or adding to a current interest, there is a wealth of material available for most anything you may wish to collect – and a large part of the fun is in the pursuit of both the known and the unknown material that awaits. All you need are the tools to help you know what to look for.

Certainly, for stamps of most topics, your first line of defense is to contact the ATA Office for any pertinent checklists that may exist for your area(s). However, if you are open to seeking out “beyond the catalog” material, there are many serendipitous discoveries to be made, allowing you to venture far beyond simply filling spaces and allowing you to enjoy your hobby even more.

The bottom-line guiding principle regarding philately – of any type – is the very real fact that this is *your* collection. You decide what belongs or does not belong in it and you don't have to acquire anything you don't wish. Similarly, if your aesthetic or topical interest guides you to non-philatelic items, they, too, can find a place in your collection without fear of reprisal. No one can or should attempt to tell you how or what to collect. This is our hobby – something we do for relaxation and enjoyment – and it's your own fulfillment you are seeking, not someone else's.

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Now, that having been said, if you wish to exhibit your material, you will have to follow the guidelines that are set out in the *Manual of Philatelic Judging and Exhibiting*, which can be found and downloaded from the American Philatelic Society's website: www.stamps.org/userfiles/file/judges/JudgingManual2016.pdf Even this doesn't have to be followed if you are not seeking hardware. If, however, you do wish to win awards along the way, then you'll need to heed the guidelines presented and follow advice from judges as you progress.

Either way, you can still maintain your collection in the manner that gives you the greatest enjoyment.

I thought it might be a good thing to take a look at some of the types of material you may wish to add to your collection as it grows, as well as different ways to think about material you seek.

The general assumption is that you will primarily want philatelic items. These include stamps, covers, postmarks, meters, permits and other elements directly related to moving the mail.

Secondarily, you will also very likely want illustrated advertising covers, appropriate letterhead, possibly cachets and perhaps some material created primarily for collectors – if you happen to enjoy it.

Finally, you may also wish to consider adding some forms of ephemera related to your topical or thematic interest. This can include picture postcards, poster stamps and other cinderellas and items that will enhance your collection.

I've decided to use a horticulture topic to illustrate some of the types of material you may wish to collect. Please understand, however, that the subject of horticulture is *extremely* broad. The stamps alone could fill many volumes. I'm using the general subject only as a means of illustrating a range of materials as broad as possible. My greatest personal interests within the horticultural topic, for example, include avocados, peppers and tomatoes, specifically.



Figure 1. The 1958 U.S. Horticulture issue, Scott 1100.

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Stamps

Again, stamps will always be the primary ingredient in any topical or thematic collection. In some cases (such as horticulture), there will be many thousands available. In others, there may only be a few. I won't spend a lot of time on the basic postage stamps, as there is much information about them that is easily accessible (catalogs, checklists, price lists and more). Most stamps for topics are available for purchase whenever one wishes.

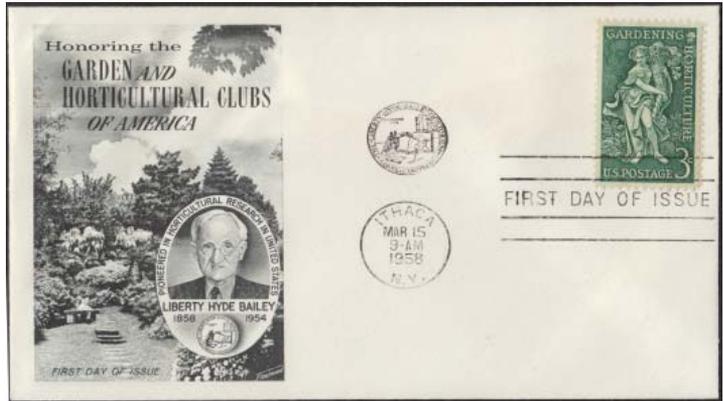


Figure 2. A cacheted first-day cover for the Figure 1 stamp.

For example, take a look at the 1958 3¢ Horticulture plate block in Figure 1. This is a very direct and straightforward issue, although the design also features elements that could be included in topicals for vegetables, flowers, fruits, women and allegory, in addition to some of the specific and identifiable items visible, such as cucumbers, pumpkins, grapes and more. A representation of this stamp could include preliminary artwork and any error, freak and oddity material available, such as gutter snipes, misperforations or major errors (there are none known for this issue). You could also collect a first-day cover, such as the one shown in Figure 2, along with cancellation variations (hand-cancels, machine cancels, unofficials or even early uses).

But other issues directly related to your topic may not be as obvious. Take, for example, the stamps shown in Figure 3, surcharged to become Morocco's first semipostals (Scott B1-B5). The connection to horticulture is not immediately obvious, until you know the story.

As I wrote a couple of years ago (*Topical Time*, July-Aug. 2014, Pages 14-15), these semipostals were created in March 1960 to raise funds to aid families who



Figure 3. Morocco Scott B1-B5, the country's first semipostals, with a strong – but not obvious – tie to horticulture.



Figure 4. An overprinted revenue stamp for use by the Wilbur Seed Meal Co.

suffered the terrible effects of adulterated peanut oil (including more than 10,000 individuals). To make a long story short (the full story appears in the referenced issue), greedy merchants purchased surplus jet engine lubricant from U.S. Air Force surplus stocks and began using it to cut the more expensive peanut oil, which people used for cooking. Thousands of people fell ill and became paralyzed during the crisis. A total of 27 merchants were eventually arrested and charged with the crime.

Once you've exhausted your sources of postage stamps, you'll next want to begin checking into revenue and other special-use stamps related to your interests.

For example, the Figure 4 stamp is a 5¢ 1898 "Battleship" proprietary revenue stamp (Scott RB31), not an uncommon stamp by itself. However, these federal revenue stamps are much tougher to locate with private company overprints. In this case, the stamp has a March 10, 1899, printed cancellation from the Wilbur Seed Meal Co., which was located in Milwaukee, Wis. There are others as well.

Similarly, you'll also want to shake the trees for state and local revenues that may tie in with your interest or collection. Figure 5 features a mint 50¢



Figure 5. A 50¢ Oregon & Washington Melon & Tomato Marketing Agreement stamp. These exist in several different denominations.



Figure 6. The revenue stamp on this crate label bears an imprinted 1¢ Michigan "Apple Advertising Fund" stamp. It was properly used on crate.

Melon & Tomato Marketing Agreements tax stamp from the states of Oregon and Washington – essentially a revenue stamp joint issue.

Figure 6 shows a tag that was attached to crates of apples with an imprinted “State of Michigan Apple Advertising Fund” stamp imprinted on it. In this case it is a 1¢ stamp. The produce company name appears to the upper right of the imprinted stamp.

Covers

The most obvious covers to be added to your collection, of course, would include those that feature uses of horticulture-related postage stamps. While first-day covers may be saved, they are not the most desirable uses. The best examples are commercial mail, and even better if they also reflect special uses and services, or if they also have auxiliary markings from difficulties encountered during transit (essentially any thing that makes it more unusual). Let’s look at a few examples.

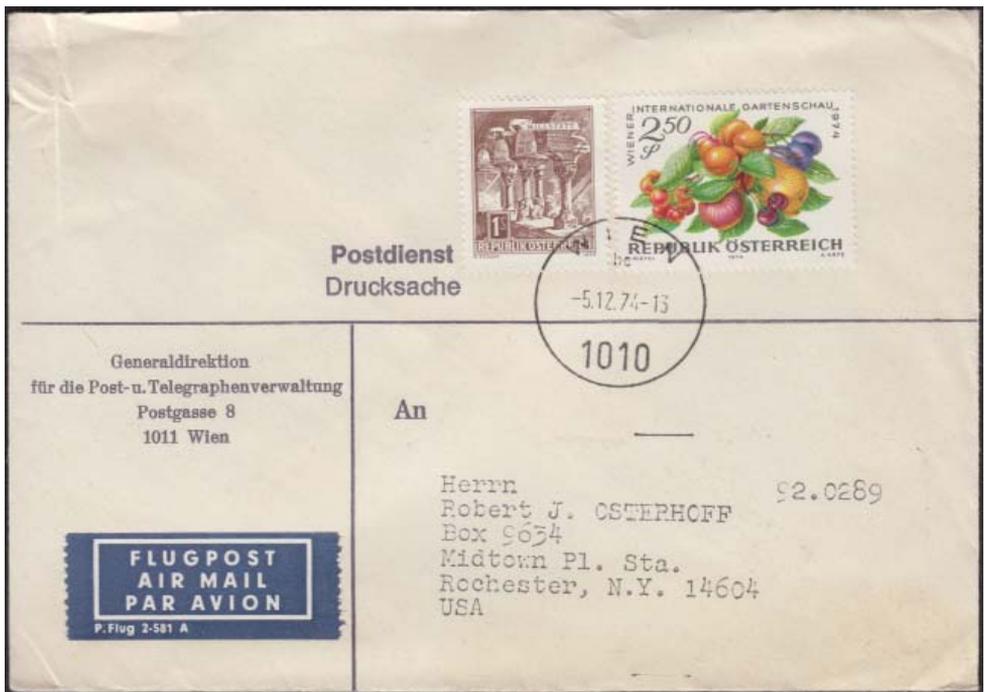


Figure 7. An interesting printed matter piece that utilizes a stamp from the 1974 International Garden Show in Vienna, Austria.

Figure 7 shows an example of a printed matter piece, or circular (Drucksache) sent by airmail from Austria to the United States in 1974. The stamp of note for our purposes is Scott 983, part of a set of three released for the International Garden Show in Vienna that year. The stamp features different fruits, including grapes, cherries and apricots and is tied (along with another) by an attractive cancel from Vienna. This is an ideal form of non-philatelic use.

Similarly, the cover pictured in Figure 8 from Argentina (April 20, 1957) is franked with a total of 2.60 pesos, paying the airmail rate to the United States. Within the



Figure 8. Another example of an inbound use, this one a 2-peso, 60c franking from Argentina, bearing a fruit stamp.

franking is a 2-peso fruit stamp, one of three primary varieties released between 1936-45, still current when the cover was mailed (Scott 537). Depicted on the stamp are grapes, watermelon, oranges, pears, cherries and other fruits.

More fruits may be found on the 1968 cover shown in Figure 9, eight out of a set of 10 stamps released May 15, 1968 (Scott639-C648). Aside from the single-topic franking, what’s interesting here is that these stamps are all part of a franking paying



Figure 9. This 1968 registered cover from Nicaragua features pineapples, bananas, orange, avocado, watermelon, cacao and more. Oddly, the stamps are not canceled, but there is a June 7, 1968, receiving mark from Herscher, Ill.



Figure 10. This commercial cover from Mexico not only features a pair of 2.50p tomato Exporta stamps, but is sent from a seed company using a tomato in its return address design illustration.

the registry fee to the United States. Unfortunately the stamps were not canceled at the time of mailing, but there is a double-ring magenta receiving postmark from Herscher, Ill., June 7, 1968, so the cover is documented as mailed and would have been sent very shortly after the stamps were released.

Concordance between stamp and cornercard on commercial mail is fairly unusual, so is highly desirable when found on a cover fitting an appropriate topic.

Figure 10, a 1981 cover from Mexico with a pair of 2.50-peso Tomato Exporta stamps paying the airmail rate to the United States (Scott C599), is from a seed company. As part of the illustrated return address cornercard the company pictured a red tomato.

Although not exactly a true commercial cover, the attractive example shown in



Figure 11. Although originally received as a bulk-mail piece, the author utilized two horticulture-related stamps to make up the then-current 42¢ first-class rate. The cover is philatelically inspired, but attractive nonetheless.



Figure 12. An attractive 19th-century registered cover showing use from a Tennessee town named for the plethora of wild strawberries growing there when white settlers first arrived in the area.

Figure 11 is a nice addition to this collection. It was originally a bulk-rate magazine subscription promotion to *Hobby Farms* magazine. The cover, originally franked by a permit imprint, is a full-color production with gorgeous photographs of tomatoes, squash, grapes peaches and more.

At the time I received the cover, in 2008, the first-class postage rate was 42¢. I realized that by utilizing a 39¢ Chile Peppers booklet stamp (Scott 4012) and the 1958 Horticulture issue, I could send the cover to myself at the exact then-current rate. Again, not purely commercial, but highly attractive.

Cancellations

Although challenging, some of the most interesting items you can add to your collection or exhibit deal with town-named cancellations that fit your topic.

One of the best (and earliest) for my horticultural collection is shown in Figure 12. This cover, mailed in 1885 (Oct. 15), represents an attractive use of the registry system, which was still relatively new at the time (27 years old).

An advertisement for R.D. Miner Philatelics. It features three stamps: a Canada 1 stamp with a duck, and two other stamps showing a tree and a dinosaur. The text reads: "FROM DUCKS TO DINOSAURS R.D. MINER CARRIES IT ALL. DEALERS IN MOST TOPICS WITH EXCELLENT SERVICE. (we answer our mail) LET US KNOW WHAT YOU ARE LOOKING FOR. R.D. MINER PHILATELICS 83 Woodgreen Drive SW, Calgary, Alberta Canada T2W 4G6 403-251-6475 • FAX 403-251-7370"

A red advertisement for Stamp Insider. The text reads: "ESSENTIAL INFORMATION FOR PHILATELISTS! Stamp Insider Free Online! WWW.STAMPINSIDER.ORG"

The cover is franked with a 10¢ Large Bank Note paying the 10¢ registry fee (Scott 209, the re-engraved version), and a 2¢ Scott 210 paying the 2¢ letter-rate postage. The cover bears two clear and attractive strikes of a Strawberry Plains, Tenn., cancel. The community, now unincorporated, is located about 15 miles northeast of Knoxville. The town, which still features a post office, was named for the abundance of wild strawberries found growing there when white settlers first arrived in the area. The post office was established in 1806!



Figure 13. Although the state name is not visible on this photographically cropped cover, the town name clearly reads "Cocoa."

The item shown in Figure 13 has been photographically cropped from its cover. It was mailed Aug. 1, 1910, to Indianapolis, Ind., from Cocoa. The state name is illegible. Since there are very few towns by the name Cocoa, it very likely is the Florida town that is now popular with postmark collectors at Christmas time. Cocoa, of course, is a derivative of cacao. Although it is not the best of strikes, it will do until another comes along.

When obtaining material for your collection(s), you should always be conscious not only of eye appeal, but relative condition. A clear strike of a postmark on a

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Figure 14. An apple or orange, struck fully on this 1880s stamp.

slightly ratty cover is better than a faint one on a pristine cover, and any example is better than none. Always be looking to upgrade the quality of your covers whenever possible, whether it's general condition, freshness, eye appeal or any other factor that will enhance your collection or exhibit.

However, keeping in mind the scarcity factor on a number of early items, it's always better to have something that fits your collection will that is in poor condition than to not have it at all. Therefore, don't pass up a damaged stamp or ratty cover that you have never seen before. Who knows if you'll ever see it again?

Fancy cancels can also add tremendously to your collection. The item shown in Figure 14 is nearly completely obliterated by what appears to be either an apple or an orange fancy cancel. Such bold (and complete) strikes are unusual on single stamps.

Figure 15 bears one of the most popular of all 20th-century fancy cancellations – one that leaves little to the imagination even if encountered without the accompanying town name. The cancel was used officially for only 40 days before



Figure 15. The well-known fancy cancel on this cropped cover doesn't require much imagination to figure out the town name.

halted by the U.S. Post Office Department in Washington. This example is on a cover from the Appleton Philatelic Society. The cancel was designed by H.M. Brehm, who had received official local post office approval.



Figure 16. The USPS is now offering full-color digital postmarks on first-day covers. Many of these, such as this gorgeous apple, have huge topical appeal (a peel?).

In recent years, the U.S. Postal Service has begun offering full-color digital postmarks for virtually every new stamp issue. These cancels are well-executed and attractive. The Figure 16 image, for example, features a juicy red apple you can almost taste – a great addition to this rapidly growing topical.

To be continued...