

## THE IMPORTANCE OF LABELS

*Erica Thomson*

Since I joined the Friday Volunteer Group at the Nottingham HPS Botanic Garden, I've become aware just how important it is to label plants. I like handwritten labels. When someone gives you a plant, it's good to have a label written by them. To me, it's a little memento, not just of the name of the plant but of the donor, also. Even if the plant doesn't survive, I will often keep the handwritten label.

Reading an article about labelling plants from the early 1980s made me realise just how much the quality of plant labels and marker pens have improved. At that time, plastic labels were used as a last resort as they would only last a year or two. A more permanent solution was preferred and suggestions included engraved aluminium, embossed copper and even wood. Marker pens could not be relied upon either. However, even today not all 'permanent' pens are the same.

Last year I took three identical new plastic labels and wrote on them with three different pens; an Edding 140S; a Staedtler Lumocolor Permanent Garden Marker Pen 1.0mm (also available as a fine tip) and a fine Sharpie. I positioned the labels together in the ground, in an open position facing south. The labels written with the Edding and Staedtler pens (photo right) are still very clear a year later but the Sharpie lettering had long gone. Labels written with thicker nibs last longer but there is rarely enough space for all the words. Even writing with a pencil works well, though using a B pencil and a rougher label is best.

As I'm right-handed, the natural way for me to write a label is to hold down the pointed end with my left hand on the left and begin writing. However, in practice this means that the first part of the name may well get pushed down below soil level and the label will have to be pulled out and possibly wiped to read the important first part of the name. Much better to begin writing at the top of the label; not only will the genus name be visible but you are less likely to run out of space too.



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If I'm labelling seed trays, I'll add the number sown (if it's under ten) and also the date. If labelling in the garden, consider burying the label close to the stem of the plant, always putting it in the same place in relation to the plant. The soil is good protection; how often have you dug up a label on which you can still read the name of a plant that has long-since disappeared?

As labels last much longer these days and are always more expensive than you think, it pays to clean them. We regularly take home bundles of labels from the Botanic Garden. The first thing I do is to bend each label to check it hasn't gone brittle. I find the quickest and easiest way to clean is to use a Stanley blade to scrape the surface off. I have recently discovered titanium-coated Stanley knife blades from Wilko, which are a little more expensive but well worth it as they do not rust and stay sharp for longer. This treatment has a bonus of making the surface a bit less smooth which is better to write on, especially with a pencil. Use the blade on its own (not in the handle) and hold at 90° to the label. The writing will be gone with just a few firm strokes. Magic Eraser sponge (available from supermarkets and sometimes Pound shops) is very useful for quickly cleaning dirt off the label and will also remove pencil and some pen marks, though not very black or heavy writing. Your labels will look new!

When we took a group from Plant Network around the Garden in November, many commented how impressed they were with our labelling, which is very important in any Botanic Garden. Of

course, at that time of year our large black labels are very prominent. We use a Brother hand-held label printer and black lettering on white 12mm laminated plastic labels, which are waterproof and last for years.

*Photographs of the Nottingham HPS Botanic Garden may be found at:*  
[www.nottmhps.org.uk](http://www.nottmhps.org.uk)

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