

longtime, safest storage of your stamps should be on acid-free paper. If you have an unusual specialty, or enjoy unique arrangements, no standard album may ever suit your needs, and homemade will be best.

Blank, acid-free album pages punched for three-hole binders are widely available. It is easy to assemble a safe, stable home for your personalized collection, if you don't need or want the kind of structured format that standard albums provide. Makers of custom pages and albums advertise regularly in the philatelic press.

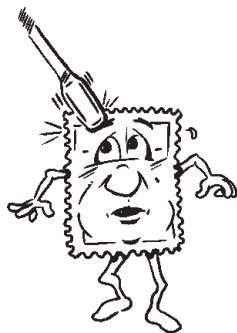
Buying an album is not so different from buying anything else. **Think before and during the purchase;** buy as wisely as you can and not over your budget; and don't be too discouraged if your first acquisition turns out to be less than perfect. You will always need places for temporary storage as you continue in the hobby. Old albums never go to waste!

• TIP 3: USING TONGS

Philatelic tongs (not to be confused with the tweezers in the medicine cabinet) are must-have items for every stamp collector. Get into the habit early of using your tongs every time you work with your stamps. They will act as clean extensions of your fingers and keep dirt, skin oil, and other harmful things from getting on your philatelic paper.

It's important to use tongs correctly. When they are used carelessly, tongs are harmful rather than helpful. Cut paper into stamp-sized pieces and practice using your tongs, watching what happens as you change the angle, pressure, and method of using them.

Grip a bit of paper strongly with the pointy-end style of tongs and watch what happens. If that were a favorite stamp, would you have wanted that hole poked in the middle of it? Keep experimenting, and you'll find that it's not difficult to hold a stamp firmly but gently with tongs.



Several common styles of tongs exist; choose one to suit your preference or for special purposes. **Some tongs have very pointed ends;** they touch only a tiny part of the stamp, but there is the risk of poking holes through it. Working with extra-long tongs (five or six inches) with small pointed tips requires a lot of dexterity, and while experts may prefer them, they may be neither comfortable nor necessary for "everyday" stamp work.

The rounded, spatula-type style known as the "spade" are good, general-purpose tongs. A **squared-off version** of the spade also is commonly available, although the rather sharp corners present the same kind of risk as the thin, pointy tongs. **One handy style is angled,** with a bend near the tips that makes it easier to remove stamps from watermark or soaking trays, or to insert and remove stamps from stockbooks or mounts.

Tongs cost anywhere from a couple of dollars to quite a few for some of the imported, high-quality models. A special gift for a philatelist would be some gold-plated tongs, which are not hard to find, believe it or not! Tongs can be found anywhere stamp supplies are sold; check under "Accessories" in the philatelic press ads.

Tongs are among the least expensive and most essential stamp hobby needs. You may even want to have several different kinds on hand — instead of your hands! Your stamps will appreciate it.

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Three Tips for Stamp Collectors: Soaking Stamps, Choosing an Album, and Using Tongs

• TIP 1: SOAKING STAMPS

Before Soaking

Set aside any stamps on brightly colored paper — especially those on red or green — or on paper with a colored backing.

(Pastel colors are usually okay.) Pick out any stamps with colored cancellations, especially with red or purple ink. These potential problems should be handled carefully later, one at a time.

Trim the envelope paper close to the stamp, being careful not to cut the perforated edges or otherwise damage the stamp. You should leave about a quarter of an inch on all four sides of the stamp.

Soaking the Stamps

Use a shallow bowl and fill it with several inches of cool-to-lukewarm water. (Use hot water only for difficult-to-remove self-adhesives.) Float the stamps with the picture side up. Make sure the stamps have room to float and do not stick to one another. Don't soak too many at one time.

Let the stamps float until the glue dissolves and the stamps *slide easily* off the paper. Paper is very weak when it is wet and it's easy to tear a wet stamp if you handle it roughly. Be patient; let the water do its work!

Rinse the back of the stamp gently in fresh water to make sure all the glue is off. Change the water in the soaking bowl often to make sure it is clean.



Place the stamps to dry on an old bath towel, paper towels, or old newspapers. (Don't use the Sunday comics! The colored inks might stick to the wet stamps.) It's a good idea to use your stamp tongs (see Tip 3!) to lift the wet stamps, instead of using your fingers. Lay the stamps in a single layer, and so they are not touching one another.

Let the stamps dry on their own. They may curl a little or look wrinkled, but don't worry about that. When they are completely dry, lift them with your tongs and put them in a phone book or a dictionary or some other book. (Special "stamp drying books" also can be purchased.) It's important not to put the stamps in a book until they are completely dry. After a few days, they should be nice and flat, and you can put them in your collection.

Stamps on Colored Paper Or With Colored Ink Cancels

Cut away all the excess envelope paper without harming the edges of the stamp.

Fill a shallow dish with cool water (cooler than you would usually use for soaking) and float the stamp *face up*. Soak only a few stamps at a time — you don't want them to touch each other.

If the water becomes stained before the stamp is free from the paper, empty the dish out and use clean water, to prevent the stamp from being stained. Remove the stamp from the envelope as soon as possible. Put the stamp in fresh water to let the rest of the gum dissolve.

Dry as before.

Dirty or Stained Stamps

These can be soaked carefully in a small amount of undiluted liquid dishwashing detergent (*not dishwasher detergent*), then rinse in clean, cool water.

Badly stained stamps can be washed gently in a weak solution of water and a bit of enzyme laundry detergent. Be careful! This solution can work too well and remove the printing ink!

Self-Adhesive Stamps

Most self-adhesive stamps have a special, water-soluble backing, and they can be soaked off envelopes. You just need extra patience, as they may have to be soaked for 20 minutes or longer before they will separate from the backing paper. Hot water (not too hot to put your hands in) will speed the process and provide better results.

In general, **all except the first U.S. self-adhesive stamp can be soaked with water.** Some self-adhesives from countries like Spain, Brazil, and France are nearly impossible to remove and should be left on the paper.

If you don't want to try soaking self-adhesive stamps, just trim the paper closely around these stamps, and then mount them in your collection with stamp mounts.

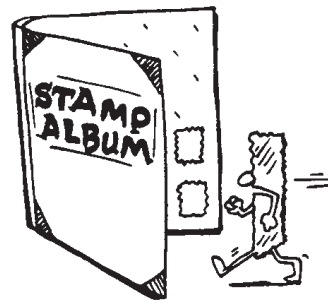
• TIP 2: CHOOSING AN ALBUM

You've raided the mailbox, rummaged in the wastebasket in the post office lobby, and pestered your friends to save their envelopes. Now that you have all these philatelic goodies, where will you put them?

True, an ordinary shoe box gives storage space, but you should want a nicer home for your treasures —

a place to display your material, not just store it. And, on the practical side, stamps and covers (envelopes with stamps on them, used in the mail) kept in a shoe box or paper folder risk damage from dirt or creases, losing value as well as beauty.

Since the first known commercial stamp album was published in 1862, the stamp hobby has grown tremendously, and many types of albums have become available.



When buying a home for your collection, here are some things to think about:

It may be your first album, but it probably will not be your last one. Your first album may be a kind of experiment, unless you already have seen someone else's album and think that kind would be right for you, too. You also may have tried homemade pages and have gotten some ideas of what you would want in a standard album.

If you are buying an album in person, rather than by mail, listen to the seller's advice, but don't be fully convinced by claims that one or another album is the best. An album may be by a famous maker, and expensive, but that doesn't make it the best one for you. Be a careful shopper; **consider all the factors** — appearance, price, format — and make the best choice. Good beginners' albums are available that are not too expensive, are fully illustrated to show which stamp goes where, and may even contain extra information, such as maps and facts about the countries.

Certain styles of albums can present problems. For example, if an album is designed for stamps to be mounted on the front and back of each page, when the book is closed, the stamps can become tangled with one another on the facing pages. Opening the book may tear the mounted stamps apart. If you are looking at an album with this page format and don't like that aspect, but do like other things about the album, buy some good preservation-quality plastic sheets to insert between the pages.

You may choose not to buy a top-of-the-line album because of cost, but do **be willing to pay for some quality.** An album with pages of flimsy paper will not stand up to the stress of increasing numbers of stamps as you fill the album. A stamp album with torn, falling-out pages is not much better than the old shoe box.

Homemade pages can be experimented with before album-shopping or may even become your permanent storage choice.

Some options include a notebook or looseleaf binder of plain paper, although