

*Summer, Spring or Fall - How to Love Your Reeds Despite It All*  
*A Concise Reed Clinic*  
*by SFC Robert Beeson*

Does this sound familiar? You have just opened a box of reeds, selected the best ones for an upcoming concert, and set them aside. The next day, you play on them again and HORRORS! They're now virtually unplayable. The concert is that night and that was your last box of reeds. The purpose of this clinic is to help the single reed player become proactive in avoiding this situation and also to offer recommendations as to how to rectify this situation once it has already occurred.

First, we need to begin with a little informal botany for the single reed player. Reeds were once living organisms. As such, they had a need for items of basic sustenance such as air, food, and water. It is this last requirement that causes single reed players the most difficulty. The cane plant has an extensive network of tubules beneath the surface of the bark. These tubules are responsible for taking nutrients from the soil at the root and sending them up to the leaves via capillary action. Unfortunately, these tubules still function in the inert wood of the reed, drawing moisture under the bark portion of the reed, and leaving the tip dry—particularly in the dry winter months or in climates with low humidity. To dramatize this natural phenomenon, take a new reed out of the box and wet it. Now place the bottom end in your mouth and blow air into the tubules found in the back end of the reed. If you do this right, you should see bubbles on the vamp (cut top portion) of the reed. This is what is responsible for pulling moisture from the vamp of the reed under the bark and causing the bottom or table of the reed to bulge and no longer remain flat against the mouthpiece. When this occurs, the reed becomes unresponsive and very hard to play. You can check to see if this is the case by placing the reed on a flat surface and alternating pressure side to side with your fingertips. If it rocks, the reed is warped. To remedy this situation, you need to restore some of the flatness to the table of the reed. This can be accomplished by first running the reed under very hot water for a minute and then very carefully bending the side rails down until the reed lays flat, and/or secondly, sanding the table of the reed with 400 grit wet-dry sandpaper until some semblance of flatness is restored. You must be careful to not over-sand the reed as it may be easily rendered unplayable.

How do we prevent this situation? We must stop the vamp from drying out too soon and seal the tubules to prevent the table from becoming water-logged. To do this, we must first assemble these easily found supplies: 400 and 600 grit wet and dry sandpaper, waxed paper, plastic Ziploc bags, and a commercial reed holder—or one constructed out of a piece of 6" by 6" Plexiglas and 3-4 heavy rubber bands to hold the reeds flat. (If you make your own reed holder, or if you have a problem with your reeds getting moldy, put a little rock salt and aquarium charcoal in a mesh bag, or portion of pantyhose, and place it inside your plastic bag.)

Now that you have assembled these items, get a new box of reeds and soak them in water for 5 minutes. Play, test and set aside the best ones. Now take one these good reeds and vigorously sand the butt end of the reed with the 400 grit sandpaper. Lightly sand the table and vamp with the 600 grit sandpaper. To finish, lightly burnish the vamp, tip and butt with wax paper until a slight sheen appears. Now your reed is sealed and the tubules are closed. This should minimize any warping of the table.

The next crucial element is to place the sealed reeds flat on a reed holder of some sort, and keep them in a consistent humid environment. This will retard the rate at which the reeds dry out. This is very important in the dry months here in the mid-Atlantic region. If you are using the no-frills Plexiglass/rubber band method, you can place them in a plastic bag with the rock salt/charcoal combo, or I have seen some reed players use a small Tupperware container to create a low budget reed humidior. Small commercial reed holders can be stored this way, or many of the deluxe reed storage systems have methods in place to regulate humidity. If you have a problem with mold growing on your reeds during the humid months, don't worry, it's harmless. To rectify this situation, simply add the rock salt/charcoal combo or leave the reeds out of the bag.

Now you have significantly stacked the odds in your favor and you should enjoy warp-free reeds in spite of the changing.

*This article provided courtesy of The United States Army Band, "Pershing's Own," Washington, DC*