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The spring and summer season of competitions and performances is coming up, so now is the right time to make sure your bagpipes sound their best. A great bagpipe sound depends on a lot of things, and an important one is having a great set of drone reeds.

I'm often asked this question: How long do drone reeds last?

That's the wrong question.

The right question is: How long do drone reeds stay in like-new condition?

The reality is that a great set of drone reeds will be great right out of the box and they will continue to be great for a good long while. But eventually they will stop playing as well and will need to be replaced. Drone reeds will not improve with time.

How do you know when it's time to replace your drone reeds?

The answer will vary based on the conditions you play in, the type of pipe bag type and moisture control system you use, and how often you play your bagpipes. I know some top pipers will get a new set of drone reeds every year, simply as maintenance to keep their performance in top form.

When you use the right drone reeds and a quality set of pipes, you can achieve a warm, smooth, and full sound that uses air efficiently, stays stable, and makes your instrument easier to tune.

The best modern drone reeds should take very little adjustment to get going. Then they should operate consistently with very little adjustment. When things start changing, and you find yourself adjusting the bridles or tuning screws or if your pipes lose their stability — it's a sign that your drone reeds are starting to go.

Here are some other signs to look for that tell you it's time to replace your drone reeds:

- Drone reed tongues seem tired
- Reed bridles are loose or cracked
- Dirt or residue on and underneath the tongues
- Trouble tuning your pipes
- Unsteady sound
- Drones shutting off too easily
- Drones taking too much air
- Drones not starting consistently
- Bass drone won't start consistently
- Whistling or squealing tenors
- Drones tuning too low or high on the pin

If you have been playing bagpipes for a while, you might have a collection of old drone reeds. We sometimes keep these old reeds, thinking they might be helpful someday. But those old drone reeds will never be as good as a new set.

As the new season starts, put your best performances out there. Every piper knows that we play best when our pipes sound and feel great. A great set of drone reeds is an important part of getting a world-class sound.

A new set of drone reeds can make your pipes easier to play, so you can focus on your tunes, execution, and musicality. A new set of drone reeds is not a luxury, it's a necessary element of your instrument set up, and a vital part of ongoing maintenance.

Happy Piping!

Jori Chisholm

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