Notes on the History of Tea

It is surprising how incomplete our knowledge is. We are all aware that we import coffee from tropical America. But where do we obtain our tea? What is tea? From what plant does it come? How long have we been drinking it? All these questions passed through my mind as I read the manuscript of the preceding article. To answer some of my questions, and yours, I gathered together the following notes.

The tea of commerce consists of the more or less fermented, rolled and dried immature leaves of *Camellia sinensis*. There are two botanical varieties of the tea plant. One, var. *sinensis*, the original Chinese tea, is a shrub up to 20 feet tall, native in southern and western Yunnan, spread by cultivation throughout southern and central China, and introduced by cultivation throughout the warm temperate regions of the world. The other, var. *assamica*, the Assam tea, is a forest tree, 60 feet or more tall, native in the area between Assam and southern China. Var. *sinensis* is apparently about as hardy as *Camellia japonica* (the common Camellia). The flowers are white, nodding, fragrant, and produced variously from June to January, but usually in October. The name is derived from the Chinese *Te*. An alternate Chinese name seems to be *cha*, which passed into Hindi and Arabic as *chha*, anglicized at an early date as *Chaw*.

The United States consumes about 115 million pounds of tea annually. The major tea exporting countries are India, Ceylon, Japan, Indonesia, and the countries of eastern Africa. Pakistan, Formosa and Argentina also export lesser quantities of tea. It is interesting to note that southern Russia produces a tea crop which is consumed domestically. Of course China also produces a large tea crop which is not exported to any extent.

Tea was being prepared in China at least as early as the 4th century A. D.; it was taxed as early as 793 (during the T'ang dynasty). Introduced into Japan (as an article of commerce) in the 9th century, it was cultivated there by about 1200 A. D.

An Arabian merchant named Soliman travelled to China about 850 A. D. and in an account of his travels described the use of tea in that country. Europeans, however, did not learn
ARNOLDIA

INDEX TO VOLUME 30

Illustrations are in bold face.

Abies concolor 'Gables Weeping,' 251
Acer griseum, 26, 210
— japonicum & vars, 168
— nikoense, 168
— palmatum & vars., 169
— pensylvanicum, 169
— rubrum, 169

Acetaria, A Discourse of Sallets, 115
Acocotli, 129
Acocoxochitl, 131
Acocotli, 133
Actinidia chinensis, 180–185
adhesives, 62–63
Ailanthus altissima, 170
Air Pollution, 40–44
Akebia quinata, 158
Albizia julibrissin 'Ernest Wilson,' 252
Alder, Black, 172
Allium, 97
Alpine Gardens, Mt. Rokko, Japan, 19, 20
Amelanchier species, 169
American Gardener, The, 115
American Hemerocallis Society, 9, 19
American Museum of Natural History, 77–79
Amur Cork Tree, 162
Amur River, 163
Andrew's Botanist's Repository, 137
Angelica-Tree, Japanese, 170
Aralia elata, 170
Arboretum Weather Station, 186
Arnold Arboretum Bulletin of Popular Information, 1, 200
Aronia species, 171
Arsenicals, 44–45
Autumn Color, Trees, 168
— Shrubs and Vines, 172
— Shrubs, 168
— Autumn Flowers, Shrubs, 168
— Autumn Fruits, Trees, 170
— Shrubs and Vines, 172
Azalea border, 85
— Pinkshell, 171
Aztec gardens, 123–125
Azuma, 163
Baccharis halimifolia, 172
Badianus, Juannes, 125
— Manuscript, 126
Bagasse: Kraft Ayensee, 58–59
Barberry, Japanese, 172
— Korean, 172
— Warty, 172
— Wintergreen, 172
Barretto, Mrs. Gloria, 19
Basic Books for the Library, Gordon P. DeWolf, Jr., 107
Bayberry, 173
Beautyberry, Japanese, 172
Beech, European, 169
Bee tree, 91
Berberis julianae, 172
— koreana, 172
— thunbergii, 172
— verruculosa, 172
Bergenia cordifolia, 240
Berlin-Dahlen Botanic Garden, 166
Betula species, 169
binding leather, 59–60, 64
Birch, 169
— American, 169
Bittersweet, evergreen, 166
Black Haw, 172
Blueberry, 172
Bonsai House, 227
Bonsai, Rhododendron indicum, 227
Boston Climatological Data, Summary of, 191
Boston Ivy, 171
Boston Poison Center, 213
Botanical Collecting, Hong Kong, 9–19
— Japan, 19–20
Korea, 19
Botanic Garden (Berlin-Dahlen), 166
— — (Harvard U. at Cambridge), 166
Botanical Garden (City University of Osaka), 20
— — (University of Bucharest), 166
— — (University of Kyoto), 20
— — (University of Tokyo), 20
Botanical Institute of Leningrad, 166
Botanico-Periodicum-Huntianum (B-P-H), 7
Bridalwreath spiraea, 172
Bromfield, Louis, 100
Brush chipper, 220
Burning Bush, 171
Bussey Institution, 97–98
*Busxus*, 15

Cabot Foundation, 98
Calcium arsenate, 44
*Callicarpa japonica*, 172
Camellia *granthamiana*, 10, 11, 12
Can Man Survive?, 77–79
Cape gooseberries, 180
Carbaryl (Sevin), 45
Card Index of plants, 81
Care and Preservation of Library Materials, George H. M. Lawrence, 56–66
*Carissa grandiflora* ‘Seminole Queen,’ 251
*Carvyr avata* ‘Holden,’ 251
Case Estates, 92–99, 166
— — temperature, 193
Case, Miss Louisa, 92
— Miss Marion R., 92
Caster-aralia, 171
Cavanilles, Antonio Jose, 122, 135
*Celastrus*, 98
*Cephalanthus occidentalis* var. *pubescens*, 257
*Cercidiphyllum japonicum*, 169
*Cercis canadensis*, 169
— — ‘Royal white,’ 252
— — ‘Silver Cloud,’ 253
*Chaenomeles*, 97
Change of place for registration authority for *Ilex*, 99
Cherry, Sargent, 169
Cheng, Peter, 15
Chinese Cork Tree, 163
Chinese Gooseberries, 180
*Chionanthus virginicus* ‘Floyd,’ 253
Chokeberry, 171
Chung Chi College, 9–18, 22
Churchyard Yews and Immortality, The, V. Cornish, 140
*Cibotium barometz*, 13
City University of Osaka, Botanical Garden, 20
Clark, William Smith, 163
Classes, Fall 1970, 197
— Spring 1970, cover 3, no. 2
*Clematis dioscoreifolia* var. *robusta*, 172
— Sweet Autumn, 172
Climate at the Arnold Arboretum, Alfred James Fordham, 186–193
Cochineal insect, 134
Cockspur Thorn, 170
Cocoxochitl, 129, 133
Coffee-Tree, Kentucky, 170
Cohuanenepilli, 126
Color charts, 83
Conifers, 27
Conservancy Society of Hong Kong, 18
Conservation, Hong Kong, 18
Convent of Huaxtepec, 134
Coralberry, Chenault, 173
Cork Tree, Amur, 171
Cork Trees, The, Helen Roca-Garcia, 162–166
*Corinns florida*, 169, 170
— *sericea*, 26
— — ‘Flaviramea,’ 26
— — *stolonifera* ‘Isanti,’ 253
*Coronilla varia* ‘Penngift’, 158
Cortes, Hernan, 123, 125
*Cotinus obovatus*, 171
Cotoneaster, 172
Crabapples, 84, 94, 171
Crab Apples for America, 84
Cranberry Bush, American, 173
— — European, 173
Crataegus collection, Maintenance and removal, 84
*Crataegus crus-galli*, 170
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Index</th>
<th>iii</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>— lavallei, 170</td>
<td>— fortunei 'Coloratus,' 158</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>— monogyna, 170</td>
<td>— radicans var. vegeta, 166</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>— nitida, 169, 170</td>
<td>— Winged, 171</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>— oxycantha, 170</td>
<td>Evenings with Friends II, 199</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>— phaenopyrum, 169</td>
<td>Evodia danielli, 170</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crook, A. H., 22</td>
<td>— Korean, 170</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crop protection, 44</td>
<td>Exochorda ‘Carol Ann Bianco,’ 254</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cytisus praecox, 86</td>
<td>Experimental Research, Case Estates, 97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dahlia, The: An Early History, Paul D. Sorensen, 121–138</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dana Greenhouses, 186</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daphne burkwoodii 'Carol Mackie,' 253</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Darrow, George, 19</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>deCandolle, Alphonse, 136</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Department of Public Health, 36</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DeWolf, Gordon P., Jr., and Silver, Mark, Yews in Fiction and Fact, 139</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DeWolf, Gordon P., Jr., 2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>— Basic Books for the Library, 107</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>— What Can We Do About Pollution?, 33–55</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>— Suburban Economics, 175–179</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dicofol, 45</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dillon, Gordon W., 2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d'Incarville, Father, 180</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dioscorides, 23</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Director's Report, Fiscal Year ended June 30, 1970, 201</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disposal of solid wastes, 179</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diospyros virginiana, 170</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distribution of New Plants, 85–89</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dogwood, Flowering, 169, 170</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drainage, 103</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Draper, Henry, 94</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dry mount, 63</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elaeagnus, Autumn, 172</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>— multiflora, 174</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>— umbellata, 172</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elsholtzia stauntonii, 168</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emmart, Emily, 126</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environmental Pollution, 33–55</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environment, Changes in, 176</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>— Early New England, 176, 177</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>— Preservation of, 176, 177</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Euonymus, 172, 173</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>— alatus, 171</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fagus grandifolia, 169</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>— sylvatica, 169</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fall Classes of the Arnold Arboretum (1970), 197–199</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Farrand, Mrs. Beatrix, 85, 157</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faxon Drawings for Christmas Cards, 195</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feder, Dr. William, 43</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ferns, Hong Kong, 21–22</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Film preservation, 63–64</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fires, 84</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flemer, William III, Plant with Nature, 100</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flora Japonica, 145</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flowering Plants of Hong Kong, The, 22</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flower Shows, 91–92</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fluorescent light, 64</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food for Birds, 116</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fordham, Alfred J., 20, 182</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>— Climate at the Arnold Arboretum, 186–193</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fortune, Robert, 180</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fothergilla, 171</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>— major, 157</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foxing stain, 62</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frances Williams and her Garden Adventures, Gertrude S. Wister, 148–154</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frankinia, 168</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>— alatamaha, 168, 169</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fung, Theresa, 18, 22</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Galanthus caucasius, 78</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Garden Club of America, visit to the Arnold Arboretum, 243</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gardener's Dictionary, Phillip Miller, 144</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Genus Hosta in Swedish Gardens, The, Nils Hylander, 150
George Robert White Medal, 156
Georgina, 136
Gerard, John, 24
Ginkgo, 169
— biloba, 169
Girdling Vines, 91
Gleditsia triacanthos, 170
Goat willow, 141
Golden-rain Tree, 171
Greenstone Pie, 185
Ground Cover plants, 95
Groundsell Bush, 172
Growing Season, 191
Gum, Black, 169
— Sweet, 169
Gymnocladus dioica, 170

Halesia monticola, 170
Hamamelis, 171
— mollis, cover 1, no. 2
— virginiana, 168
Handbook of Hollies, 67-71
Hardiness map, Arboretum, 83
Harvard University at Cambridge, Botanic Garden, 166
Hawthorn, English, 170
— Glossy, 169, 170
— Lavalle, 170
— Single Seed, 170
— Washington, 169, 170
Heat, library, 65
Hebb, Robert S., Notes from the Arnold Arboretum, 25-26, 72-74, 116, 168-173, 251-260
Helianthus tuberosus, 247
Hemerocallis, 9, 19, 20, 97
— minor, 19
Hemerocallis Society, 97
Hernandez, Francisco, 128
Hibiscus species, 207
Historia Naturalis, 115
History of Botany, 115
Hokkaido, 163
Hollies, 96
Holly, American, 170
— Japanese, 172
— Longstalk, 170
Holly, Yew and Box, W. Dallimore, 141-142
Holmes, Dr. F. W., 38
Honeylocust, Common, 170

Hong Kong, 9
— Flora of, 22
— map, 16-17
— Natural History Society, 10
— Report from, Shiu-Ying Hu, 9-22
Horticulture at the Arnold Arboretum, 1936-1970, Donald Wyman, 81
Hortus Kewensis, 137
Hosta sieboldiana, 148
— sieboldiana, 'Frances Williams,' 152
— undulata, 149
Hosta plot, 98
Howard, Heman, 83, 138
Howard, Richard A., A Change in Arnoldia, 1
Huango-po, 163
Huaxtepec, 124-125
Hupeh, Western, 163
Hu, Shiu-Ying, Report from Hong Kong, 9-22
— Notes on the Genus Ilex Linnaeus, 67
Humidification, library, 65
Hunt Botanical Library, 2
Hurricane of 1938, 82
Hydrangea 'Tokyo Delight,' 20
Hylander, Nils, Genus Hosta in Swedish Gardens, The, 150
Ichang Gooseberry, 181
Icones et Descriptiones Plantarum, 135
Ilex aquifolium, 67-70, 69
— change in place of registration authority, 99
— crenata, 172
— glabra, 172, 206
— International Registration, 99
— Linnaeus, Dr. Shiu-Ying Hu, 67-71
— X meserveae, 68, 69
— nomenclatural history, 67
— opaca, 170
— pedunculosa, 156, 170, 206, 211
— rugosa, 67-71, 68
— verticillata, 172
Illicium, from Hong Kong, 15
Imperial Garden (St. Petersburg, Russia), 163, 166
Index to Arnoldia, 200
Industrial Pollution, 33–34, 38, 41, 43
Inkberry, 172
Inks, 60–61
International Plant Propagators’ Society, Nineteenth Annual Meeting, 117–119
— Registration Authority for cultivated Ilex, 99
Introduction and Distribution of New Plants, 85
Jack, John George, 163
Jade Jewel, 184
Japanese Cork Tree, 166
Josselyn, John, 24
Judd, William H., 81
Juniperus chinensis ‘Sargentii,’ 158
Jussieu, Bernard, 180
Kalmia latifolia, 207
Kalopanax pictus, 171
Katsura Tree, 169
Kew, 137
Kitamura, S., 19
Kiwi Fruit, 180–185
— — Upside Down Cake, 185
Koelreuteria paniculata, 171
Korea, collecting Hemerocallis in, 19
Kraft Aysensee, 58–59
Landscape architecture, see Plant With Nature
Landscape planting, Ecological requirements, 102
Landscaping, 84
Larch, Golden, 169
Lavalle Cork Tree, 163
Lawrence, George H. M., 2
— Dr. George H. M., Care and Preservation of Library Materials, 56–66
Laws, Pollution, 35–36
Lead arsenate, 44
Leather binding, 59–60, 64
Lecture Series “Meet the Staff” Spring 1970, 90
— — Fall, see Evening with Friends, II, 199
Lee, J. B., 19
Legislation: Pollution, 34–37
Lespedeza bicolor, 168
Library collections, 2–8
Library of Congress, 6
Library materials, care and preservation of, 56–66
Lightning damage, 222, 223
Ligustrum species, 172
Lilies, 96
Linnaeus collection, 60–61
Liquidambar styraciflua, 169, 171
Liriodendron tulipifera, 102
— — ‘Ardis’, 254
Lonicera henryi, 158
Low Maintenance Garden, 93, 94, 234
Lycium chinense, 158
Lysichiton camtschatensis, 20
Lysidice rhodostegia, 15
Macao, 180
Magnolia grandiflora, 12
— X loebneri, 95
— Star, 172
— stellata, 155, 172, 206
— Sweetbay, 172
— virginiana, 172
Maidenhair Tree, 169
Malathion, 45
Malus x adstringens ‘Kelsey’, 254
— — ‘Rodney’, 255
— — ‘Sparkler’, 255
— ‘American Beauty’, 255
— ‘Cameron’, 255
— ‘Donald Wyman’, 116, 147, 256
— ‘Henrietta Crosby’, 94
— ‘Maybride’, 256
— ‘Pink Charming’, 258
— ‘Pink Perfection’, 256
— ‘Royal Ruby’, 258
— sargentii, 167
— sieboldi, 147
— ‘Snowcloud’, 258
— species and cultivars, 171
Manglietia fordiana, 12
Manuscripts: preservation of, 57
Mao-erh-tao, 181
Map, Hong Kong, 16–17
Maple, Fullmoon, 168
— Japanese, 169
— Nikko, 168
— Red, 169
— Striped, 169
— Swamp, 169
Map of grounds, 82
Martinus de la Cruz, 125
Massachusetts Agricultural College, 163
— College of Pharmacy, 84
— Horticultural Society, 2
— laws, Pollution, 35–36
Maximowicz, C. J., 166
Medicinal plants, Garden of, 84
Mercer Research Fellows, 1970, 234
Merrill, Dr. E. D., 85
Merry, Mrs. Percy L., 97
Metasequoia glyptostroboides, 228
Methoxychlor, 45, 207
Meyer, F., 19
Mexican History (Botanical), 122–132
Microclimates, 187
Microfilm, 5, 58
Miller, Phillip, 144
Mint Shrub, 168
Moctezuma, 123–124
Moosewood, 169
Mountain-Ash, European, 169
— Korean, 169
Mt. Rocco, Alpine Garden, 19, 20
Mulch display plots, 94, 237
Myrica pensylvanica, 173

Nahuatl, 125
Nandina domestica 'Moyer Red,' 259
Nannyberry, 172
Narcissus, 96
National Science Foundation, 8
Natural Cycle of Growth, 101
Naturalist in Western China, 163
Nepenthes, Hong Kong, 14
New England Rarities Discovered, 24
New mulching materials, 94
New York Botanical Garden, Library, 6
Nomenclatural history of Ilex, 67

Nopal Cactus, 134
Norietis, Arturs, 186
— on the Genus Ilex Linnaeus, Dr. Shiu-Ying Hu, 67–71
Nuttall, Zelia, 123
Nyssa sylvatica, 169

Oak, Black, 169
— Pin, 169
— Red, 169
— Scarlet, 169
Olmsted, Frederick Law, 84
Orchids, Hong Kong, 15, 19
Origin of Cultivated Plants, The, 114
Ortega, 137
Over-pollution, 34–36
Oxydendrum arboreum, 169, 171
Ozone, Air pollution, 43

Palmer, Ernest, 83
— E. J., 34
Pamphlets, Preservation, 56
Paper preservation treatment, 61–62
Paradisi in Sole Paradisus Terrestris, 115
Paris Green (copper aceto-arsenite), 44
Parrotia, Persian, 169
Particulates: Air Pollution, 41–43
Parthenocissus quinquefolia, 158, 171
Passiflora, 128
Payne, C. Harman, 137
Pearfruit Cork Tree, 166
Penultimate manuscript, 57
Permanent nursery area, 95
Persimmon, common, 170
Pesticides, 44–46, 50–55, 178, 179
— Safe, 45–46
— Toxicity table and hazards, 50–55
Phellodendron, 162–166
— amurense, 162, 164–165, 171
— chinense, 162
— japonicum, 166
index | vii

- lavallei, 163
- piriforme, 166
- sachalinense, 163

Phillip II, 128
pH in paper preservation, 58–59, 62, 65
Photo-chemical smog, 43
Photographic material: preservation, 57–58
Photoperiodic response, 101
Picea omorika, 72, 73, 206
Pieris floribunda, 157, 206
Pigweed, 23
Pinus banksiana ‘Uncle Fogey,’ 259
- flexilis ‘Scratch Gravel,’ 259
- ponderosa ‘Twodot Columnar,’ 259
- strobus, Witches’ Broom seedlings on, 219
Planchon, Jules, 180
Plane Tree, 171
Plantago major, 23, 23–24
- medicinal uses, 23, 24
Plantain, 23–24
Plant Distribution, 85
Plant Introduction Garden, Chico, Cal., 182
Plant Registration — Notes from the Arnold Arboretum, 251–260
Plant with Nature, 100
Platanus species, 171
Platycodon, Hong Kong, 15
Pollution? What Can We Do About, Gordon P. DeWolf, Jr., 33–55.
Poplar collection, 84
Population, 175
- excess, 34–36
Portulaca oleracea, 114
Potassium lactate, leather preservation, 59–60
Precipitation gauges, 192
Preservation of Library Materials, G. Lawrence, 56–66
Pride, Mr. George, 97
Prunus sinensis, 94
Privet, 172
Problems in urban pollution, 33
Problems of Horticultural and Botanical Libraries, John F. Reed, 2–8
Protection of Crops, pesticides, 44
Pruning Exhibit, 91
Pruning program, 84
Prunus sargentii, 169
Pseudolarix amabilis, 169
Purslane, 114
Quercus coccinea, 169
- palustris, 169
- phellos, 102
- rubra var. maxima, 169
- velutina, 169
Rabbit damage, 207
Radiational cooling, 189
Rag paper, 59
Raup, Dr. Hugh M., 187
Real Estate Tax, 175–176
Redbud, Eastern, 169
Reed, John F., Problems of Horticultural and Botanical Libraries, 2–8
- 2, 56
Rees, Abraham, Cyclopedia (1819), 24
Rehder, Alfred, 183
Report from Hong Kong, Shiu-Ying Hu, 9–22
Report of the Director, 201
Rerum Medicarum Novae Hispaniae Thesaurus, 129
Research, Staff, 1970, 215–217
Reviews, Dr. Alexander Garden of Charles Town, Edmund Berkeley & Dorothy Smith
- The Book of Spices, Frederick Rosengarten, Jr., 29–31
- Can Man Survive? 77–79
- The Early Horticulturists, Ronald Webber, 75–77
- Making Things Grow, Thalassa Cruso, 28, 29
- Man, Nature, and History, W. M. S. Russell, 120
- Orchids, Floyd S. Shuttleworth, Herbert S. Zim, and Gordon W. Dillon, 159
- A Photo Guide to the Patterns of Discoloration and Decay in
Living Northern Hardwood
Trees, Alex L. Shigo and Ed-
win vH. Larson, 196
— The Quest for Plants, Alice M.
Coats, 75–77
Rhododendrons, 84
Rhododendron carolinianum,
157, 206
— indicum Bonsai, 227
— periclymenoides, 158, 207
— prinophyllum, 158, 207
— schlippenbachi, 158, 207
— vaseyi, 158, 171, 207
— yedoense var. poukhanense,
86
Rhus species, 173
— aromatica, 158, 171
— copallina, 171
— glabra, 171
— typhina, 171
Roca-Garcia, Helen, Weeds: A
Link with the Past, 1. The
Plaintain, 23
— Weeds: A Link with the Past,
2. Purslane, 114
— The Cork Trees, 166
Rosa species, 173
— virginiana, 26, 172
— rugosa, 171
— wichuriana, 158
Rose, 173
— Rugosa, 171
— Virginia, 172
Roxbury-Dorchester Beautifica-
tion Program, 230–233
Rutaceae, 162
Safe Pesticides, 45
Sakhalin Cork Tree, 163, 166
Salix caprea, 141
Salt Pollution, 38–39
Sand, planting in, 105
Sargent, Charles Sprague, 1, 81,
182
Sassafras, 169
— albidum, 169
Sax, Dr. Karl, 85
Sciadopitys verticillata, 157, 206
Scorgie, Dr. Helen, 96
Seed collection, problems of, 87
Serviceberry, 169
Sevin, (Carbaryl), 45, 207
Sewage, 38
Shade Trees, Pollution of, 38–39
Short, Charles, 56
Shrub Bush-clover, 168
Silber, Mark and DeWolf, Gor-
don, Jr., Yews in Fiction and
Fact, 139
Silverbell, Mountain, 170
Small Tree Demonstration Plot,
95
Smog, Photo-chemical, 43
Smoke district, Boston & Vicini-
ty, 40–41
Snowberry, 173
Soil, Pollution, 37–40
Sorbus alnifolia, 169
— aucuparia & vars., 169
Soot and Fly Ash, Air Pollution,
41
Sorensen, Paul D., The Dahlia:
An Early History, 121–138
Sorrel Tree, 169, 171
Sourwood, 169, 171
Sovasol, 207
Special Collections, Case Estates,
96
Spiraea prunifolia, 172
Stachys grandiflora, 238
Stephanandra incisa 'Crispa,' 158
Stewartia, Korean, 169
— koreana, 169
Strandell, Dr. Birger, 60–61
Sutton, Stephanie, Actinidia chi-
nensis, the Kiwi Fruit, 180–
185
Suburban Economics, Gordon P.
DeWolf, Jr., 175
Sulphur Dioxide, 41
Sumac, 173
— Fragrant, 171
— Shining, 171
— Smooth, 171
— Staghorn, 171
Sweet-gum, 171
Sweetleaf, Asiatic, 173
Symphoricarpos albus, 173
— x chenaultii, 173
Symplcopers foetidus, growing
in Japan, 20
Symplcopers paniculata, 173
Syringa prestoniae, 94
— reticulata, 166
Taxation, 175–176
Index | ix

Taxes, 37, 39-40, 46
TAXUS, 139-147, 173
— Baccata, 141, 146
— brevifolia, 145
— canadensis, 144, 145
— cuspidata, 145
— var. capitata, 145
— x hunnewelliana Rehd., 143
— x media Rehd., 143
Temperatures at Arnold Arboretum, 189-193
— differences in, 192 — gradients, 189
Thesaurus, 129
Thierry de Menonville, Nicolas Joseph, 134
Thouin, Andre, 136
Tokyo, University of, 163
Trees and Shrubs, Charles Sprague Sargent, 166
Tree of Heaven, 170
Trees for your Community, 95
Tree Lilac, 163
Trips to Europe, 87
Trott, L., 15
Tsuga canadensis ‘Watnong Star,’ 260
Tupelo, Black, 169

Union List of Serials, 7
University of Tokyo, Botanical Garden, 20
U. S. Department of Agriculture
Bureau of Plant Industry, 182
— Weather Bureau, 186
U. S. National Arboretum, 19

Vaccinium species, 172
Veitch nurseries, 181
Vellum-bound books, 60
Viburnum, 94
— cassinoides, 173
— dilatatum, 173
— xanthocarpum, 172
— lantana, 172
— lentago, 172
— Linden, 173
— Mapleleaf, 172
— opulus, 173
— Orange-fruited tea, 173
— prunifolium, 172
— setigerum var. aurantiacum, 173
— trilobum, 173
— Yellow Linden, 173
Vinca minor, 148
Virginia creeper, 171
Von Siebold, P. F., 145

War Years, 84
Water Pollution, 37-40
Water resources, 178
Wayfaring Tree, 172
Walden, or Life in the Woods, 115
Weather data, Arnold Arboretum,
Jan. 1968—Nov. 1969, 26
— Feb.—Mar. 1970, 119
— April—May 1970, 154
— summary 1969—1970, 199
Weather Station, 188
Weeds: A Link with the Past, 1.
The Plantain, Helen Roca-Garcia, 23-24
— Purslane, Helen Roca-Garcia, 114-115
Weevil, white pine, 74
Weston Garden Club, 93
What can we do about pollution?,
Gordon P. DeWolf, Jr., 33-55
White Pine Weevil, 74
— Witches’ Broom seedlings on, 219
Williams, Frances Ropes, 148
Williams, Robert G., 85
Wildenow, Karl, 136
Wilson, Ernest H., 1, 20, 81, 145, 163
Winter in the Arnold Arboretum,
25-26
Winterberry, 172
Wister, Gertrude S., Frances Williams and Her Garden Adventures, 148-154
Wisteria, 98
Witch-hazel, 168, 171
Witches’ Broom seedlings on
White Pine, 219
Witherod, 173
Woo, Ting-Kwok, 9, 12-13
Wyman, Donald, 1, 82, 183, 200
— Horticulture at the Arboretum, 1936–1970
— Mrs. Donald, 93
Yang-tao, 181
Yang-taw, 182
Yew, 173
Yews in Fiction and Fact, Mark Silber and Gordon P. DeWolf, Jr., 139–147
Yu Expedition, 86
Yung, C. T., 18
Zuccarini, J. G., 145
about tea until the publication of Juan B. Ramusio's edition of Marco Polo's Travels in 1545.

It is not certain whether it was the Dutch or the Portuguese who first introduced tea into Europe very early in the 17th century. It was apparently first brought to the attention of the (British) East India Company in 1615. Between 1615 and 1657 small lots of tea appeared in London (imported from Holland) and sold for between £5 and £10 per pound. In 1657 the proprietor of Garroway's Coffee House obtained a large consignment and began offering the prepared beverage for sale. In 1664 the East India Company presented two pounds two ounces of tea to King Charles II, at a cost to them of 40 shillings per pound. By 1677 the demand was so great that the East India Company finally took steps to obtain a regular commercial supply of tea.

From 1660 until 1689 the prepared beverage was taxed in England at the rate of 8 pence per gallon. Beginning in 1689 a duty of 5 shillings per pound was levied, plus 5% ad valorem. The taxes were gradually increased, until about 1770 when they totaled 119% of the original value. It may be recalled that at that period the tax on tea figured in certain disturbances in the American colonies.

Tea was first known in the West only as dried leaves, and for a considerable period the true tea plant was unknown to western botanists.Apparently the first living tea plant in Europe was owned by one Captain Goff, a director of the East India Company. It is recorded that he grew it in his orangery, and that he would not part with any propagating material. In due course of events his plant died and the species was temporarily lost to cultivation in the West. In 1763 Carl Gustavus Ekeberg, the captain of a Swedish East Indiaman presented Linnaeus with seedlings of tea that he had germinated and grown on a return voyage from China. Living plants were reintroduced into England about 1770, and Thomas Martyn records that they were introduced into Georgia at about the same time. It is also recorded that the younger Michaux planted tea as an ornamental in the gardens of the Middleton Barony, on the Ashley River, about 15 miles from Charleston, S. C., about 1800.

Tea was introduced into Brazil in 1810. In an attempt to facilitate commercial production a colony of Chinese were settled in southern Brazil also. By 1850 the Chinese colony had broken up, but by then tea plants were widely distributed in Brazil.

About 1835 the (British) East India Company began planta-
tion culture of tea in India. It should be noted that by this
time the Dutch had plantations in Indonesia which were pro-
ducing tea commercially.

Dr. Junius Smith, a lawyer who was one of the founders of the
British and American Steam Navigation Co., started a tea
plantation on his property near Greenville, S.C., in 1848. Un-
fortunately he died in 1852 and his plantings were neglected.
At about the same time a Dr. William Jones, in Riceboro (or
McIntosh), Liberty County, Georgia, set out a tea plantation.
In 1858 Robert Fortune was commissioned to obtain propagat-
ing material of tea, as is described in the preceding article.
Fortune sent about 10,000 tea plants which were increased to
30,000 in a short time. Tea seeds were also imported from
Brazil. These were distributed in the southeastern states until
the war brought an end to this activity. After the war fresh
supplies of seed were imported from Japan. In 1867 it was dis-
covered that seed could be obtained domestically from the plants
imported in 1858. Between 1868 and 1876 some 5,000 to
20,000 plants were distributed annually. Between 1877 and
1879 more than 100,000 tea plants were distributed. Apparently
the plants grew well, but none of the recipients seem to have
produced tea commercially.

In 1880 the Hon. W. G. Le Duc, United States Commissioner
of Agriculture, engaged a Mr. J. Jackson, a British national who
had had experience in tea production in India, to set up a model
commercial plantation. The property formerly owned by Dr.
Jones, in Liberty County, Georgia, was purchased, and his
plantings were the source of samples of tea submitted to the
Commission that spring. Mr. Jackson also planted more than
20,000 more tea plants that first year.

In the United States tea culture was encouraged sporadically
by the government for the next thirty years but with little suc-
cess. After the publication, in 1912, of Bureau of Plant Industry
Bulletin No. 234 "The Cultivation and Manufacture of Tea in
the United States," official governmental encouragement of tea
cultivation seems to have ceased.

Gordon DeWolf, Jr.

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On December 14 a reception was held at the Administration Building in Jamaica Plain for the Sponsors, Patrons and Donors of the Friends of the Arnold Arboretum, to meet Miss Stephanne Sutton, on the occasion of the publishing of her book, *Charles Sprague Sargent and the Arnold Arboretum*.

Miss Sutton was present to autograph copies of her book while the Friends enjoyed refreshments and examined the displays of Sargent memorabilia. Examples of *The Silva of North America, The Forest Flora of Japan, Manual of the Trees of North America*, all by Sargent, were on display, as well as books by Alfred Rehder, E. H. Wilson, George Russell Shaw, and other contemporaries of Sargent. Also of interest were examples of "Garden and Forest," a journal of horticulture, with articles signed "C.S.S."

Another interesting item was a colored map of North America showing natural divisions of North American forests, prepared under the direction of C. S. Sargent.

A collection of photographs of remote parts of China and Tibet, by Joseph Rock, Wilson, and others, were displayed, as well as historic photographs of James Arnold, Joseph Rock, E. H. Wilson, and C. S. Sargent and his family. It was an afternoon of homage to Charles Sprague Sargent and of appreciation to Stephanne Sutton for her fine book.