

# First Impressions of the Arnold Arboretum

by MICHAEL DIRR

First impressions are often the most critical and permanent in one's assessment of a person, place or plant. Presently I am on sabbatical leave at the Arnold Arboretum of Harvard University and have literally fallen in love with the institution. If one is interested in studying, photographing and enjoying hardy woody plants, then the Arnold Arboretum is the place to visit. Nowhere else (and I have visited a plethora of plant collections) are the species and cultivar diversity so rich, the records so profuse and creditable, the library so voluminous, the propagation so detailed, and the people so enthusiastic. The Arnold Arboretum is truly America's greatest garden. I have come to appreciate it as a treasure trove of woody plants unrivaled on the North American continent and perhaps the world.

Traditions ooze from every nook and cranny of the Administration Building and one feels that somewhere in the shadows (and there are many) lurk the spirits of Charles S. Sargent, the indomitable first director; Ernest H. Wilson, the great plant explorer; and Alfred Rehder, whose literary contributions are the standards by which other botanical and horticultural offerings are gauged.

The historical aspects of the Arboretum are well documented through the writings of Sargent, Wilson, Wyman and Sutton. The institution is steeped in tradition and there is a type of magic in the name Arnold Arboretum. Among botanists, horticulturists and gardeners, the Arboretum is a household word and this cannot be said of any other institution. The Arboretum's staff has made numerous literary contributions to botany and horticulture. I think of Sargent's classic work, *Manual of the Trees of North America*, with the excellent drawings by C. E. Faxon. Rehder's *Manual of Cultivated Trees and Shrubs* is considered the bible for woody plant identification. Presently Stephen A. Spongberg is revising Rehder's *Manual* and incorporating his own unique ideas and style which will result in a better publication than the original. Wilson's prosaic descriptions of the Arnold Arboretum's collections in the *Aristocrat* series make for relaxing reading. Wyman's books, *Trees for American Gardens*, *The Gardening Encyclopedia*, and others provide tremendous visibility for the Arnold and actually have opened the living collections to the gardeners of the world. His books were the most popular texts for woody plant material courses through the 1950's and 1960's.

Willingly, or otherwise, Wyman influenced several decades of horticultural students.

The two periodicals, *Arnoldia* and the *Journal of the Arnold Arboretum*, are vehicles for the dissemination of popular and scientific information, respectively. *Arnoldia* can be appreciated by the lay gardener as well as the scientist. Articles may range in scope from wreathmaking and the Director's report to excellent treatises on specific plants. Specific issues may treat poisonous plants or, as in the case of Robert Hebb's "Low Maintenance Perennials," consume several issues and assume book status. *Arnoldia* articles are written for enjoyable and informative reading. One does not have to read through a glossary to make sense of the various offerings. My University of Illinois students are introduced to *Arnoldia* and many become subscribers. *Arnoldia* is a great literary bargain in the vast sea of horticultural literature. The *Journal* is much more scientific and represents a scholarly (refereed) vehicle for taxonomic research. I have browsed and read many arboretum and botanical garden publications and for quality and quantity of information none compares with *Arnoldia* or the *Journal*.

The Arboretum library offers an excellent selection of periodicals and books. References that are not available in the University of Illinois library (fourth largest in United States) have found their way into the Arboretum stacks. The library also houses unusual items, such as John Wister's *Swarthmore Plant Notes*. These volumes are laden with Dr. Wister's evaluations of the plant collections at Swarthmore College and represent a tremendous compilation of horticultural information.

The Arnold has maintained good records through the years. Painstaking record keeping might seem like an obvious necessity for every arboretum, but in reality seldom occurs. The Arnold's collection is of documented, authentic origin which is a tremendous attribute for serious researchers. Propagation is one of my research, as well as avocational, interests and these records have proved invaluable.

The Arnold's herbarium contains one of the most complete collections of cultivated plants in the world. Most people cannot appreciate the herbarium aspect of an arboretum, but it is as important as the library, the living collections, and the records.

My principal reason for coming to the Arnold on sabbatical was to work with the living collections. It is here that I derive the greatest satisfaction. I am a plantsman and would as soon study plants as eat. Some days I find myself lunching at 3:00 p.m. simply because I became so engrossed in the collections. I have asked myself repeatedly that if this sort of thing is occurring when green is the dominant color, what will happen in fall and spring?

Allow me to share some thoughts and opinions related to specific members of the living collections. When I walk through the maple collection I wonder why *Acer griseum*, paperbark maple, *Acer mandshuricum*, Mandchurian maple, *Acer triflorum*, three-flower maple,



*The mature bark of Acer triflorum is ash-brown, loose, and vertically fissured.  
Photo: D. Wyman.*

and *Acer mono*, painted maple, do not play a more prominent role in modern landscapes. Our gardens are poorer because of their paucity. Their small stature, fall coloration, bark, insect and disease resistance are unrivaled. Unfortunately, propagation difficulties limit wholesale distribution. The maples are a diverse group and the range of aesthetic attributes places them at the forefront of all landscape plants.

The *Phellodendron amurense*, Amur corktree, along Meadow Road is one of my favorites. Although old age and physical abuse are contributing to decline, it remains one of the most picturesque of all Arboretum offerings. The low-slung, corky-textured branches curve skyward and terminate in flat tiers of foliage. In this same area the *Tilia*, lindens, almost overwhelm one in late June and July with their enticing fragrance. *Tilia* × *euchlora*, Crimean linden, *Tilia japonica*, Japanese linden, *Tilia petiolaris*, pendent silver linden, and *Tilia tomentosa*, silver linden, are my favorites. The *Aesculus*, buckeyes and horsechestnuts, meld with the lindens and provide a fine show during May. A valuable exception is *Aesculus parviflora*, bottlebrush buckeye, which produces white, cylindrical, bottlebrush-shaped inflorescences in July. This is one of the very finest native shrubby landscape plants for sun or shade, yet is uncommon in American gardens.

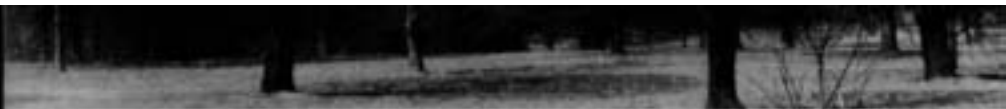
The shrub collection is a favorite haunt and I attempt to walk through a portion every day. The *Vitex*, chaste trees, and *Potentilla*, cinquefoils, offer late season color. *Buddleia*, butterfly-bush, could not have been more appropriately named and a rose called 'Arnold' flowers out of synchronization. The rose hips of glistening orange and red attract my camera. I do not always know where to turn next for there never seems to be sufficient time for everything. *Clethra alnifolia*, summersweet clethra, white and pink, spice the garden. The bees treat them provincially and often I am buzzed as I attempt to secure a close-up.

The forsythia and lilacs are resting and appear nondescript during the summer and autumn months but will become the stars of Bussey Hill Road next April and May. Further on the *Halesia*, silverbells, rank among my favorites with their pendulous, white, bell-shaped flowers. They are four-season ornamentals and deserve wider usage. In the same area (Center Street beds), one finds the *Styrax*, snowbells, more handsome specimens of which I have not seen. At the end of a grassy path between the *Ilex*, holly, and *Corylopsis*, winter-hazel, resides a spectacular *Parrotia persica*, Persian parrotia. Parrotia is a member of the witch-hazel family with pest-resistant foliage, quilt-work bark, and a uniqueness that defies description. E. H. Wilson would have certainly called this an 'Aristocrat'.

The conifers, hornbeams, beeches, and birches are worth more than a casual look. Crabapples, hawthorns, and mountain-ashes appear endless. The Chinese walk, before the summit of Bussey Hill, is laden with outstanding plants. The stewartias, whether in flower, fall color, or bark are spectacular. There is an impressive specimen

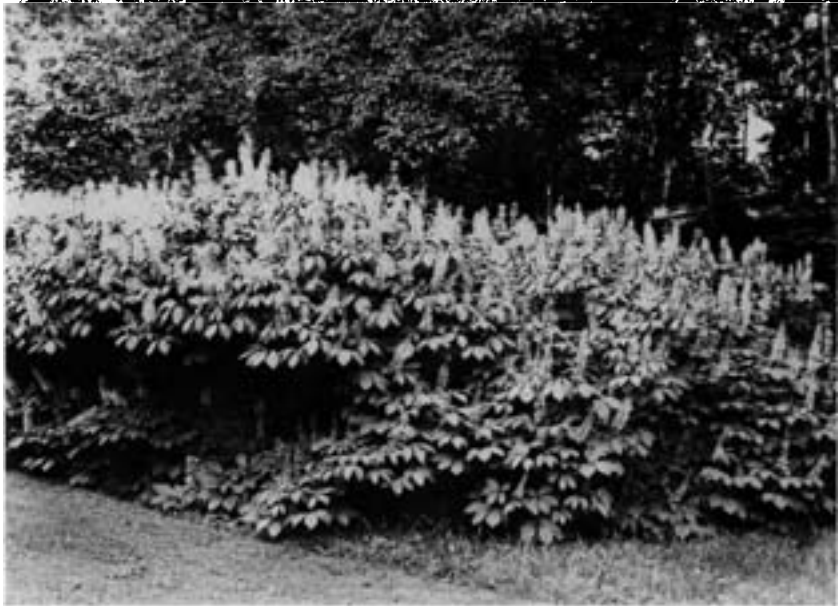


*Winter outline of Tilia tomentosa emphasizes the uniform growth habit and smooth gray branches.*



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*The graceful, flowing outline of Aesculus parviflora makes it an ideal choice for shrub borders and underplantings. The adaptability to full sun or heavy shade permits its use in many landscape situations.*

of *Chionanthus retusus*, Chinese fringetree, which in flower has been likened to a fleecy dome of snow. The oldest paperbark maple in this country is nestled among the stewartias. The infamous *Davidia involucrata*, dove tree, for which E. H. Wilson endured much pain and suffering, resides in this most exclusive of neighborhoods.

If I seem enthusiastic it is not without reason, for the Arnold possesses a great collection of woody plants. The institution is not immune to problems, however. The Administration Building is showing its age and needs refurbishing; the city has encroached and encircled the Arboretum making it more vulnerable to the invasion of man; and many of the plants are old and require considerable maintenance to keep them in presentable condition.

Tradition tends to dictate the Arboretum's practices and programs where innovation and change would prove most beneficial. I envision a computerization of records so that information storage and retrieval could be easily facilitated. Photographic equipment could be updated and perhaps an artist/photographer added to the staff. Plant breeding might be initiated and propagation research could be expanded to include tissue culture. Although woody plants have proven rather difficult to propagate by this method, what better place to advance the frontiers than at the Arnold Arboretum?

The Arnold is the best at what it does and can be even greater. Its publications rank among the best in botanical and horticultural literature. It has contributed much to American gardens. Perhaps more has been given than will ever be received or properly recognized. It is America's Greatest Garden.

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*The beautiful flowers of Stewartia are evident in July when most gardens suffer from a paucity of color. Photo: P. Bruns.*