

# The Dove Tree: A Long Journey West

Richard Schulhof

Whether for a plant collector or a gardener with a taste for the remarkable, there is much to recommend in a tree that combines a curious beauty with a storied past. For those interested in the history of plant introduction, few species conjure more images of turn-of-the-century exploration than the famed dove tree (*Davidia involucrata*). And for horticulturists, the first encounter with the dove tree is often like one's first taste of champagne, initially peculiar to the palate but greatly prized by the end of the glass.

It was like that for me. The occasion was a student field trip on a blustery spring day in Boston, Massachusetts; the location was the Arnold Arboretum. After a long search for the tree, we were a little disappointed with our first glimpse of a specimen that was surprisingly inconspicuous from a distance—the many white, fluttering bracts might have been mistaken for leaves with a pale underside. Closer examination, however, revealed inflorescences of exquisite complexity. Uneven pairs of improbable greenish-white bracts (“doves”) hung dramatically from maltball-sized globes of a wonderful chocolate brown. With my hand lens I made out scores of small male flowers covering these balls like the florets of a dandelion; near the center stood the single female flower. I had never seen anything quite like it.

But the experience was especially memorable because we believed the tree before us was not just any dove tree but a historic specimen grown from seed collected by Ernest H. Wilson, the celebrated plant explorer most closely associated with the Arnold Arboretum. Ironically, however, the tree in question—the Arboretum's best specimen—results not from a Wilson expedition but from that of an earlier plant explorer, French missionary Père Paul Guillaume Farges.



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*An outstanding specimen of Davidia involucrata var. vilmoriniana, in all likelihood the oldest in North America, accession #5159, resides on Bussey Hill's Chinese Path.*

I was familiar with the story of Wilson and the dove tree, having recently read Stephanie B. Sutton's marvelous biography of the Arboretum's founding director, Charles Sargent. In 1869, the species was first discovered by French missionary Père Armand David in Sichuan Province, near the Tibetan border. Described and named after its discoverer in 1871, the *Davidia* was subsequently sighted by Augustine Henry, an English physician with a great passion for botany then stationed in China. In 1893, he wrote enthusiastically, “*Davidia* is worth any amount of money. I saw only one tree of it, but doubtless there are others in the district . . . *Davidia* is wonderful.”

Sir Harry Veitch of the prominent Veitch Nursery in Chelsea, England, read Henry's encomium and resolved to be the first to offer the heralded new species commercially. He hired Wilson, then a twenty-two-year-old horticulturist, to travel to China, giving him clear instructions: “The object of the journey is to collect a quantity of seeds of a plant (*Davidia*) . . . This is the object—do not dissipate time, energy or money

on anything else." Beginning in the spring of 1900, Wilson, working from a map provided by Henry, searched a large area of central China only to discover that the one tree of known location had been cut for lumber. Undeterred, he eventually found several fruiting trees, and he sent hundreds of seeds back to England. The first plant came into bloom at the Veitch Nursery in 1911. However, unbeknown to both Wilson and Veitch, Père Farges had in 1897 sent 37 seeds to the arboretum of Maurice de Vilmorin in Les Barres, France. In 1899, one of those seeds germinated and the resulting tree bloomed in 1906. So even though Wilson could claim responsibility for broadly distributing the dove tree, thanks to the large quantities of seed he had gathered, the credit for introducing the first specimen to the west belonged to Farges. Smarting from the loss of greater glory, Wilson wrote, "After my successful introduction of *Davidia* in 1901, and its free germination in 1902, I had yet one little cup of bitterness to drain."

It is from the one plant germinated from Farges' seed that the outstanding specimen at the Arnold Arboretum (accession #5159\*A) originated. The plant, a rooted layer, was obtained by Charles Sargent and planted at the Arboretum in 1904. Injured by severe cold early in life, the tree resprouted from its base to form the multi-stemmed specimen we know today. When it bloomed for the first time in 1931, then Arboretum director Oakes Ames, writing in the Arboretum's *Bulletin for Popular Information*, declared that the specimen was notable more for its botanical novelty than for its beauty:

We are told that in its native land, when laden from top to bottom with enormous white floral bracts, some of them attaining a length of eight inches or more, *D. involucrata* presents a wonderful aspect. But from an aesthetic point of view it has little to recommend it. Its claim to a place in the garden rests on the bizarre form rather than the beauty of the inflorescence.

If he could see the fully mature specimen of today, Oakes Ames might very well revise his opinion. Now over 30 feet in height, the tree in bloom is without question an outstanding feature of the Arboretum's spring landscape (remember, though, the dove tree is an alternate-year bloomer). You can usually find it in full



*The distinctive bark of the dove tree*

flower on or about Lilac Sunday, perched on the west-facing slope of Bussey Hill along Chinese Path near several other spectacular specimens of similar vintage. Interestingly, a few feet away grows a dove tree that originated from the seed collected by Wilson for the Veitch Nursery and sent to the Arboretum as a sapling in 1911. A somber reminder of failed expectations, the Wilson specimen (accession #14473\*A) resides in the shade of *stewartias* and has never attained the physical prominence of its nearby neighbor. Like most dove trees in cultivation, both specimens are of the botanical variety *Davidia involucrata* var. *vilmoriniana*, which differs from the species in having smooth rather than felted leaves.

Still rare in gardens, *Davidia* is unrivaled among hardy trees for historical, botanical, and horticultural distinction. More than a one-season ornament, it offers attractive mottled, reddish-gray bark along with three- to five-inch leaves that are a bright green and usually free of pests or disease. The large round fruits, roughly one-and-one-half inches in diameter, dangle singly and often persist into the winter. Although once established it is hardy to USDA zone 6, young plantings may require some protection in extreme winters. Please note that if you plant a seedling from the Arboretum plant sale, you will wait up to ten years before seeing a bloom. Yet according to E. H. Wilson, the flowers of "the most interesting and beautiful of all trees of the north temperate flora" are well worth the wait.

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