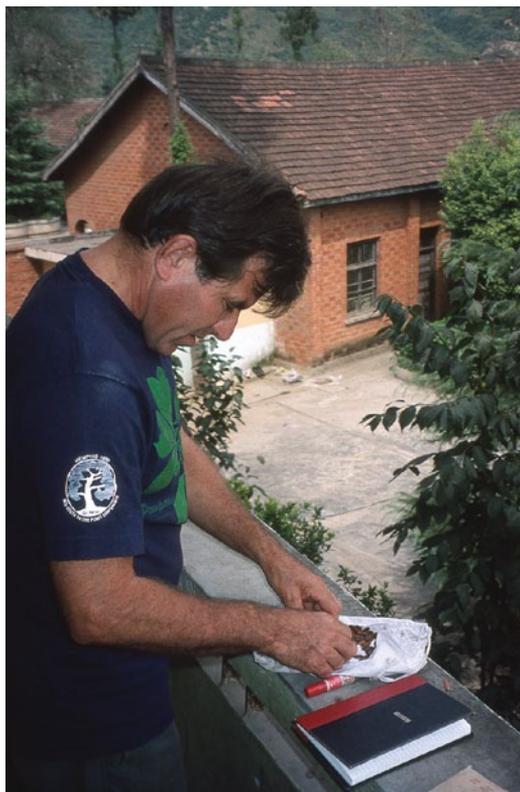


The Case for Plant Exploration

Peter Del Tredici



Peter Del Tredici inspecting persimmon seeds during the NACPEC expedition to Wudang Shan, Hubei, China, in 1994.

The history of plant exploration is as old as human history itself. People have been discovering, collecting, and moving plants for eons, and the process is not likely to stop any time soon. Indeed, it is as ancient as the practice of agriculture itself—it's part of our genetic heritage. The challenge plant collectors face today is how to continue their work without causing further problems for our already badly damaged environment. Despite the best efforts of many research scientists, we have yet to develop a truly reliable way of predicting whether an unknown plant will be problematic without actually growing it under a variety of conditions to see how it behaves. Botanical gardens, with their relatively secure perimeters and their commitment to science over commerce, are places where new plant introductions can and should be tested for a variety of traits including their potential invasiveness

As the world environment continues to deteriorate as a result of human-induced phenomena such as acid rain and climate change, there can be little doubt but that we are going to need tough, adaptable plants for our managed landscapes more than ever. Many of our native species—including such familiar trees as American elm, eastern hemlock, sugar maple, and white and green ash—are no longer planted in our cities because of insect, disease, or stress susceptibility. We have a real need to replace them with stress-tolerant, non-invasive species that can survive all the abuse that people throw at them. Some of these plants of the future may be native to North America, but I can guarantee you that some of them—either as species or as hybrids—will come from Central and Eastern Asia.

And that's where the North America–China Plant Exploration Consortium comes in. For the past twenty years this collaborative organization has made it a priority to try to deal with future horticultural problems without creating new ones in the process. The organization is devoted to the collection, propagation, and study of plants in their native habitats, with a potential outcome of selection and eventual introduction. There can be little doubt but that plant diversity—in all its glorious forms—is going to be crucial in keeping the planet habitable, most especially for humans.

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