

# The Pear to End All Wars: *Pyrus ussuriensis*

Matthew McDermitt

One of my favorite things about the annual plant inventory at the Arnold Arboretum—the process of field checking each plant—is that you discover interesting specimens that many overlook. On a windy Halloween afternoon, I encountered a Ussurian pear (*Pyrus ussuriensis*, accession 11302\*C) growing in dense woods along South Street. The tree was struggling for light and space under a canopy of old oaks and would not impress the average observer, but like all plants at the Arboretum, it has a story that is documented in our plant database.

When the First World War began in 1914, Ernest Henry Wilson was busy collecting plants in Japan. Charles Sprague Sargent, the Arboretum's director, was travelling in England, and when he realized the gravity of Europe's political conflict, he asked Wilson to cut his trip short. Upon returning to Boston in 1915, Wilson was shocked to learn about the sinking of the *RMS Lusitania* and the rapid expansion of Central Powers across Europe. At the Arboretum, tensions began to rise between Wilson (an Englishman) and his friend and colleague Alfred Rehder (a German taxonomist). Wilson and his wife, Ellen, began only speaking to the Rehder family in a professional context. Relief came when Sargent sent Wilson on his sixth plant-collecting expedition in January 1917. Just before Wilson's departure, Sargent wrote to a correspondent of "bad times," but he noted that "there is no use thinking about them when there are trees to think of."

Wilson spent the next two years collecting plants throughout territory that was then occupied by Japan. In 1918, he collected seed from a Ussurian pear in the Gyeonggi Province of South Korea (then known as Keiki-do, Japan), giving rise to accession 11302.

The specific epithet for *Pyrus ussuriensis* refers to the Ussuri River, which flows from eastern Russia into northeastern China, forming part of the border between the two countries. The species inhabits this region—the coldest and most northern range of any pear species (it is hardy to USDA Zone 3)—along with portions of Korea and Japan. While

not of global conservation concern, the species is endangered in Japan. The Arboretum also holds *P. ussuriensis* var. *hondoensis*—a Japanese variety, currently listed as vulnerable in Japan—along with the regional cultigens 'Pin-li', 'Shinchu', and 'Shu-li'.

The flowers of the Ussurian pear are among the most attractive of the genus: the immature buds are tinged deep red, and the color initially remains as the five petals unfurl. Once fully open, the flowers measure 3 to 3.5 centimeters (about 1.25 inches) in diameter and have beautiful dark red anthers that pop against the white petals. The flowers are similar to those of the Callery pear (*Pyrus calleryana*), but are notably larger and open earlier in the season. The Callery pear became a wildly popular street tree in North America, but it fell from grace when it escaped into natural areas, not to mention limbs that would drop with the slightest wind. In contrast, *P. ussuriensis* hasn't demonstrated invasive tendencies or structural flaws.

Besides the beauty of the flowers, Sargent was impressed by the size of the species. In the *Bulletin of Popular Information*, Sargent noted that the Ussurian pear is the tallest and largest of all pear species, citing a specimen that Wilson photographed in Korea, which was 18 meters (60 feet) tall with a trunk diameter of 1.4 meters (4.5 feet). He was also excited that *Pyrus ussuriensis* appeared resistant to fire blight, a plant disease that plagues many members of the rose family, but unfortunately, minor fire blight has been observed on Arboretum accessions within the past decade.

Wilson returned to the Arboretum in early 1919, several months after the First World War had officially ended. Although the original pear that grew from his South Korean collection is hidden in a natural area, an exceptional example of *Pyrus ussuriensis* var. *hondoensis* (accession 11728\*A) grows on the northern side of Poplar Gate Road. This tree was grown from seed Wilson collected in Nagano, Japan, on the same expedition.

---

Matthew McDermitt is a former curatorial assistant at the Arnold Arboretum.

