

Leaning into Legend: *Acer mono*

Jon Hetman

Ambling over nearly every acre of the Arnold Arboretum over the past two decades has made many of its pathways and collections special to me, but perhaps my favorite journey of all is the one I take nearly every day from the Forest Hills Gate to the Hunnewell Building—the lion’s share of my morning commute. My great fortune in walking the short mile from home to work in a city recently named the nation’s worst for rush-hour traffic* is certainly not lost on me—nor is the fact that it is always a journey of beauty and discovery as the seasons ebb and flow. One tree I never tire of admiring along my way is a superb accession of painted maple (*Acer mono*, accession 5358*A) leaning somewhat languorously toward the road and welcoming visitors to our national collection of maples.

Walking in either direction down Meadow Road, the tree is nearly impossible to miss and even harder to ignore. Though not extremely tall—*Acer mono* typically tops out at a moderate thirty to forty feet at maturity—it has a beautifully low, broad, and symmetrical crown that suggests the kind of idealized form that bonsai artists pursue. In spring, yellow-green flowers appear in tandem with the pale green foliage, which in autumn may turn a yellow-orange or apricot. Come winter, the tree’s graceful architecture shines through its bare canopy, and the sight of sparkling snow twisting across its branches never fails to send me running for my camera. And then there’s the soft twist and southward tilt of the trunk, subtended by a thick knot of exposed roots seemingly coiled like a snake at its base. These thickly layered roots spread out in the opposite direction of the lean, illustrating how tree structure leverages the dynamics of tension and compression (like a suspension bridge) to mitigate the gravitational forces that might otherwise topple them over.

While the case can be made that this individual represents its species rather well, the taxonomy of *Acer mono* remains largely unresolved. Although the Arboretum recognizes *A. mono* as the correct name, authorities have been mixed on both the name and identity of

this widespread maple, often placing it within *A. pictum*, among other taxa. Seed for 5358*A was received in 1902 from the Imperial Botanic Garden in Tokyo, an institution that has shared material with the Arnold Arboretum since Charles Sprague Sargent made his pioneering expedition to Japan in 1892. Painted maple inhabits the forests of Japan, and it can also be found in China, Korea, Mongolia, and eastern Russia. The Arboretum’s wild-collected holdings of the taxon include material collected on several North America-China Plant Exploration Consortium expeditions, including the 2018 expedition to western Hubei Province.

Nevertheless, this particular tree has attained a level of celebrity at the Arboretum. Its position at the head of the maple collection, contrasting handsomely with the texture and seasonal hues of the showy Japanese (*Acer palmatum*) and Korean (*A. pseudosieboldianum*) maples nearby, contributes to its appeal. As such, the tree and its neighbors receive attention in many of the Arboretum’s public tours each growing season. When famed horticulturist Michael Dirr published the 1983 edition of his seminal *Manual of Woody Landscape Plants*, following his tenure as a Mercer Fellow at the Arboretum in 1979, he heralded this painted maple as “one of the most beautiful trees in the Arnold Arboretum.” And this praise has unwaveringly remained in subsequent editions.

This individual may, in fact, be the most famous and recognizable painted maple in the world: as of this writing, a photograph of it adorns the entry for the species on *Wikipedia*. Its status as a botanical treasure and museum object, one perhaps endangered by an overabundance of public attention, has been acknowledged more definitively of late by the Arboretum as well. Like other eminent accessions across the Arboretum, the tree has been roped off to preserve the health and integrity of its root system from soil compaction. Hopefully this additional protection will contribute to its well-being for years to come and allow this noble maple to be admired as a masterpiece for as long as nature wills.

Jon Hetman is the associate director of external relations and communications at the Arnold Arboretum.

* INRIX 2018 GLOBAL TRAFFIC SCORECARD

