For almost one hundred years, gardeners, homeowners, and students who wanted to learn about shrubs made their way to a gently sloping plot of land just inside and to the right of the Arboretum's Forest Hills gate. Bounded by the Arborway and Forest Hills Road on the north and east and by the ponds, natural woods, and maple collection on the south and west, the linear arrangement of the three-acre shrub collection made it easy to identify. Today the site hosts the Bradley Collection of Rosaceous Plants, but—as directors' reports and archival records document—before this transformation began in 1981, it had been home to the oldest continually maintained collection in the Arboretum’s landscape.

Visually, it was perhaps also the most distinctive. Completely different from the rest of the Arboretum, where the picturesque reigns supreme despite the collection's taxonomic arrangement, the shrub collection's rows of formal, parallel beds probably confounded most visitors. The very existence of a separate shrub collection is a reminder of the difficulty of accommodating in a single design the disparate requirements of a scientific collection and a public park. It also reminds us of the sometimes opposing views held by the two men who accomplished that task, Charles Sprague Sargent and Frederick Law Olmsted.

In 1874, when he first approached Olmsted with the notion that an arboretum would be a valuable addition to the plan for the Boston park system, Sargent was 33 and although he had only “a modest reputation as gentleman landscape gardener,” his professional standing was impressive and growing. In May of 1872 he was appointed professor of horticulture at the Bussey Institution (founded 1869; closed 1940s), a position first held by his friend, neighbor, and mentor Francis Parkman. (Sargent resigned this position at Harvard's school of scientific agriculture, which abutted on the Arboretum's land, in 1877.) In November of 1873 he became director of Harvard's botanic garden in Cambridge, working under Asa Gray, the father of American botany, and at the same time, he was named director of Harvard's newly established Arnold Arboretum in Jamaica Plain; it was in hopes of linking the new arboretum to the Boston park system that he addressed his proposal to Olmsted.

Olmsted, then 55 and still working in New York—on Central Park, among other projects—had a national reputation in landscape architecture and had been a proponent of arboreta since
the beginning of his career. Sargent’s proposal may have appealed to him because an arboretum had been included, though never realized, in the Olmsted and Vaux 1858 plan for Central Park.

SARGENT, OLMSTED, AND THE SHRUB GARDEN

The collaboration between the novice botanist and well-established landscape designer worked. Under Asa Gray’s tutelage, Sargent had learned the importance of the individual elements within a landscape, and he valued the ability to recognize, identify, and compare each plant to all others. Olmsted, by contrast, looked beyond individual plants; for him, they were subordinate to the overall design and composition. But the two men agreed that the design for the Arboretum’s landscape would have to satisfy both scientific and aesthetic requirements. And as Ida Hay writes in her preface to Science in the Pleasure Ground (1995) “the dynamic tension between science and aesthetics turned out to be one of the most interesting themes of Arboretum history.”

Early in the planning process, Sargent insisted on accommodating “a working or experimental collection” within the otherwise wooded and naturalistic design. The idea may in fact have begun as a practical method for dealing with the abundance of shrubby plant material already on hand soon after the Arboretum’s founding. Months before Olmsted’s involvement and before any work had been done on the design, the future site of the shrub collection served as a nursery and a holding area for the thousands of plants intended for the rest of the grounds. Establishing a nursery and making an inventory of plants on hand were among the few projects that Sargent could undertake with “the very limited means at the disposal of the Director” during 1873, the first year of the Arboretum’s existence.

The nursery site was possibly one of the most fertile areas of what an elderly Sargent much later recalled as the “worn-out farmland” on which the Arboretum was established. Described in 1692 as upland and meadow by its first recorded owner, Samuel Gore, the land became part of the farm of Joseph Weld in 1718 and remained in the Weld family until purchased by Benjamin Bussey in 1810. It was also conveniently adjacent to the Bussey Institution, where Sargent had established an office for himself and commandeered space in the greenhouses that were now to be “devoted to the raising of forest and ornamental trees and shrubs for future plantations” at the Arboretum. Seed for the new arboretum was pouring in from other institutions throughout the world, and Jackson Dawson, the Arboretum’s first propagator (originally the Bussey’s), was making ambitious collections of native plants. Within just three years, Sargent would report that “to relieve the overcrowded nurseries, 3,181 forest trees have been planted out.”

Taken from the hillside just above the lilac and forsythia collections, this is one of the earliest known images of the Arboretum. The upland in the middle distance became the site of the shrub collection, and the treeline represents the future route of the Arborway, constructed in the early 1890s. Putting Olmsted’s design into effect transformed the standing water of the low-lying, wet meadow into three distinct ponds, two of which were bisected by Meadow Road. This image is from the Lantern Slide Collection at the Harvard Design School, an especially comprehensive assemblage of images of early American landscape design. They were taken between 1850 and 1920 and digitized in 1996 through a Library of Congress-sponsored competition. The 2,800 lantern slides can be accessed through the American Memory Page of the Library of Congress (http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/award97/mhsdhtml/aladhome.html).
Published in the October 1898 issue of New England Magazine, this image shows an early version of the collection’s layout when the rows of “young shrubs” extended right up to the edge of the roadbed. Each plant’s identity was painted on a wooden stake as the signage had not evolved to the “boldly lettered stand labels” that became the norm for the collection. Taken just inside the Forest Hills gate, the long view shows the remnant flora of “Woodland Hill,” Benjamin Bussey’s estate. Several of the mature trees at the crest of the hill have the characteristic shape of American elms, while the conifers on the right appear to be white pines. The group of trees in the middle distance occupies the present site of the ash collection just above the lilacs.

By 1878, when Frederick Law Olmsted began to work on a planting arrangement for the Arboretum, the nursery area had been under cultivation for five years and occupied much of the open land near the present-day ponds. Although one of his early studies suggests that Olmsted had considered a formal “greeting,” or promenade, for this location, it is only in the last design, dated August 29, 1885, and signed by John Charles Olmsted, nephew and stepson of F. L. Olmsted, that the first reference to a plan for the area appears.

In the Bentham and Hooker plant classification sequence, which was used to arrange plant families within the Arboretum’s landscape, the rose family should have been placed where it is today, near the ponds. Surprisingly, however, the plan calls for orchard-like rows of plants at that location. A likely explanation for this anomaly is that not only a nursery, but a collection of shrubs—arranged in rows—already occupied the site.

While at the botanic garden in Cambridge, Sargent had completed a successful and handsome renovation of the systematic beds. He had weeded duplicate specimens, increased the number of species, reordered the collection to correspond with the organization of specimens in the herbarium, and added grass paths to provide easy and attractive access to the plants. In Sargent’s estimation he had “brought order out of Chaos.” Faced with a “large and rich collection of shrubs located in the nursery” at the Arboretum, it is no wonder that he proposed in 1884 “to arrange this collection . . . in systematic order . . . until the completion of roads by
the city on the east side of the grounds make it possible to permanently group the different shrubs upon a [more] picturesque and natural plan than can now be adopted."

Although doing so required draining the ground below the nursery and relocating all the shrubs, within a single year he could claim that the "provisional or tentative arrangement of the shrub collections referred to in my last report has been completed. These now occupy thirty-seven parallel beds, each ten feet wide and three hundred feet long. This collection now contains about eleven hundred species and varieties arranged in botanical sequence, with provisions for a considerable further increase." Thus came into being the shrub collection whose design would simultaneously please botanists and horticulturists, irritate directors and superintendents, challenge landscape architects and students, and mystify many visitors throughout its century-long lifetime.

That year, 1885, was in general a momentous one for Sargent, with several projects begun during the previous decade now coming to culmination. In 1879, on the recommendation of Asa Gray, Sargent had been appointed to manage the nation's tenth forest census, and the results of that study had just been published as The Report of the Forests of North America. At the same time, an exhibit of over 500 samples of wood, amassed by Sargent for Morris K. Jesup, was about to open at the American Museum of Natural History in New York; the exhibit, called "The Woods of the United States," displayed Sargent's notes on each species' structure, qualities, and uses. Lobbying for the Arboretum to be included in the Boston park system had succeeded, and the indenture between the city and Harvard had been signed three years earlier. And, most significant of all for the Arboretum, the city had finally built enough roads so that the systematic planting of the "permanent" collection could begin.

At the end of the year, a confident Sargent described his vision for a public arboretum in the 1884-1885 Annual Report of the Director of the Arnold Arboretum to the President and Fellows of Harvard College; he had formally accepted the Olmsted firm's final plan for the planting arrangement and declared the first of the Arboretum's collections—the shrubs—completed. By this time he had decided that two distinct collections should be maintained within the Arboretum: the first, or "permanent collection for display, [would consist] of a selection of species intended to illustrate . . . the most important types of arborescent vegetation"; while the second, a "collection for investigation, which need not necessarily be permanent . . . should be arranged in a manner to permit the admission of . . . new forms and the removal of others which have served their purpose. To this second collection would naturally be joined all minor collections like that of shrubs and other plants of less enduring character than trees."

Olmsted's feelings about the displacement of Rosaceae by Sargent's shrub collection are unknown. Little correspondence between the two men survives—perhaps because, as Sargent testified many years later at a Park Department hearing, the two "spoke daily." The conversations between Olmsted and Sargent about the placement of shrubs must have been interesting. One letter, written by Sargent to Olmsted on April 22, 1888, when the tree groups were being set out on the hillside above the ponds, suggests that discussions about plant placement continued for years after Olmsted's final plans had been accepted. Of today's much beloved lilac collection and its bright yellow companions and fellow harbingers of spring, Sargent wrote, "Isn't it a mistake to plant forsythia, syringa [lilacs] and other showy flowered garden shrubs on the Arboretum Hill? I should be afraid that they would not harmonize with the general scheme of planting . . . How will a mass of bright colored garden flowers look rising above the softer first tints seen everywhere else in the Arboretum?"

Four months later the debate about the use of "showy" exotic shrubbery spilled over into the pages of Sargent's newly founded Garden and Forest, a Journal of Horticulture, Landscape Art, and Forestry. The first sally in the debate, appearing in the issue of August 1, 1888, was an unsigned note placed among the editorial articles. The sentiments may have come from the journal's knowledgeable New York editor, Williams Stiles, but they are as likely to have
originated with the journal's "conductor," Charles Sprague Sargent:

It is not easy to explain why certain plants look distinctly in place in certain situations and why other plants look as distinctly out of place in the same situations. This is a matter which nature perhaps has settled for us. It is certain at any rate that combinations of plants other than those which nature makes or adopts inevitably possess inharmonious elements which no amount of familiarity can ever quite reconcile to the educated eye. Examples of what we wish to explain abound in all our public parks, and especially in Prospect Park in Brooklyn... where along the borders of some of the natural woods and in connection with native shrubbery great masses of garden shrubs, Diervillas, Philadelphus, Deutzias, Forsythias and Lilacs, have been inserted. These are all beautiful plants. They never seem out of place in a garden; but the moment they are placed in contact with our wild plants growing naturally as they do, fortunately, in the Brooklyn park, they look not only out of place, but are a positive injury to the scene.

As the designers of Prospect Park had been Olmsted and Calvert Vaux, it is not surprising that the editorial elicited a prompt reply from Mr. Olmsted.

To the Editor of GARDEN AND FOREST:

Sir.—In GARDEN AND FOREST of August 1st, page 266, the law seems to me to have been laid down that the introduction of foreign plants in our scenery is destructive of landscape repose and harmony. No exception was suggested, and the word harmony was used, if I am not mistaken, as it commonly is in criticism of landscape painting, not of matters of scientific interest.

The question, as we understand it, is essentially this: Would all of the trees and bushes that had come of a foreign ancestry be noted before any of the old native stock?

It appears to us... that the American Chionanthus, Angelica, Cercis, Ptelea, Sumach, Flowering Dogwood, Pipevine and Rhododendrons would be placed before some of the foreign Barberries, Privets, Spireas, Loniceras, Forsythias, Diervillas or even Lilacs. We doubt if the stranger, seeing some of these latter bushes forming groups spontaneously with the natives, would suspect them to be of foreign origin...

Frederick Law Olmsted, Brookline, September 1888

Perhaps the debate had ranged too widely—or come too close—for at this point the editor stepped in:

Mr. Olmsted's letter should be read with the greatest care and attention. No man now living has created so much and such admirable landscape, and no man is better equipped to discuss all that relates to his art. The position which GARDEN AND FOREST has taken upon the question of composition in plantations made with the view of landscape effect is embraced in the following sentence, extracted from the article to which Mr. Olmsted refers: "It is certain, at any rate, that combinations of plants, other than those which nature makes or adopts, inevitably possess inharmonious elements which no amount of familiarity can ever quite reconcile to the educated eye." This sentence was written with special reference to the fact that in Prospect Park, in Brooklyn, various showy flowered garden-shrubs of foreign origin had been massed among native shrubs growing apparently spontaneously along the borders of a natural wood in the most sylvan part of the park. The effect which this combination produced appeared to us inharmonious, and therefore less pleasing than if the plantation had been confined to such shrubs as may be found growing naturally on Long Island in similar situations. How far the idea of harmony in composition in landscape is dependent upon association it is hard to say.

The truth is that great masters of landscape construction can combine material drawn from many climates and many countries into one harmonious whole, but the masters of the art are not many, and the planter who is not sure of his genius can wisely follow nature in her teachings of harmony in composition. Had this reservation been made in the article referred to, our statement that "all attempts to force Nature, so to speak, by bringing in alien elements from remote continents and climates, must inevitably produce inharmonious results," would, perhaps, have been less open to criticism.—ED.

But by then the Arboretum's Diervilla, Philadelphus, and Deutzia (though not the large collections of Syringa and Forsythia) had been relegated to the shrub collection, away from the more "naturalistic" and "permanent" plantations. But this disposition may only have brought more trouble for Sargent. In almost every succeeding annual report he showed his
Although undated, this photograph from the J. Horace McFarland Collection was probably taken during the winter of 1905-1906, shortly after the construction of the vine trellis that enclosed the shrub garden on three sides. McFarland (1859-1948), a lifelong friend of Charles Sprague Sargent and a well-known author, publisher, horticulturist, and rosarian, wrote as floridly on the Arboretum as he did on roses. In “A Tree Garden to Last a Thousand Years,” an article published in the first volume of “The Country Calendar” in 1905, he emphasized that “Even in the ‘Order,’ which is the name of the amphitheater of single specimens of shrubs, arranged in botanical order for easy comparison and study, there is informal formality and continuous beauty.”

Part of the Smithsonian Institution Archives of American Gardens, which hold approximately 80,000 photographic images and records documenting historic and contemporary American gardens (available online at http://gardens.si.edu/horticulture/res_ed/AAG/coll-mcf.htm) the McFarland Collection includes over 3,100 black-and-white mounted photographs and 445 glass lantern slides of gardens throughout the United States and dates from 1900 to 1962.

obsession with the collection’s ongoing needs and with his pursuit of the perfect design. If he was not “improving its arrangement,” he was “devoting more time to studying and improving” it, or had to “extend and rearrange” it by “lifting every plant and rearranging the beds.” One design revision—presumably made to accommodate more plants—changed the arrangement from 37 seven-foot beds to 15 eleven-foot beds, achieving an increase of only five feet (from 8,325 to 8,330). The collection was clearly “suffering from the want of proper space,” and he worried how it would be “adequately provided for in the future.” By 1906, the collection had undergone three complete rearrangements, and Sargent admitted that although it was a principal feature of the Arboretum and its most complete collection, “the arrangement has not, however, proved entirely satisfactory.”

After one last attempt at redesign, this time with the plants displayed in 19 beds, each ten feet wide, and occupying a total of only 7,765
linear feet, Sargent conceded defeat. In 1907, he reports that it has been necessary to plant genera formerly accommodated in the shrub collection along the drives and in other parts of the arboretum. The “excluded” groups include the rhododendrons, azaleas, kalmias, and viburnum and dogwood collections. Mention of the shrub collection subsequently disappears from his annual reports.

He does, however, introduce a new element into the design. A ten-foot tall, 1,280-foot-long vine trellis was erected to provide shelter for the beds along the northern and eastern sides of the collection. Made of concrete posts strung with galvanized wire, it was the Arboretum's first attempt to bring together a collection of vines and other climbers. The trellis itself, not unlike the layout of the shrub collection, would be modified and rebuilt, but the two collections would soon be thought of as one: the shrub and vine collection.

As for those conspicuous plantings on Bussey Hill, by the 1920s Sargent appears to have had a change of heart. Writing in *The Bulletin of Popular Information*, a seasonal guide to plants made available to Arboretum visitors for a dollar a year, he notes, “Forsythias are often badly planted; they require space in which to spread...
their long, gracefully arching branches and are not suitable for small gardens. To be most effective they should be planted as in the Arboretum, in a great mass on a bank or hillside."

The lilacs were also given their due by Sargent in the Bulletin, "The flowers of no other plant bring so many visitors to the Arboretum." Beginning in 1915, in what surely gave rise to the now famous Sunday celebration, Sargent began predicting when the lilacs would attain their fullest bloom. In 1920 he forecast that "Most of the varieties of the common lilac will be in flower when this Bulletin reaches its readers living near Boston." In May of 1920, he wrote, "The plants will be in full bloom by Saturday, the 29th," and when the spring of 1924 proved to be slow in coming, he commented that "They are late blooming this year but are now fast opening their flowers, and it is possible that Sunday, the 25th, will bring the largest number of visitors of the year to the Arboretum."

The first trellis, constructed of ten-foot high posts of reinforced concrete set fifteen feet apart, provided seven parallel strands of wire for the vines to climb. According to E. H. Wilson, with this layout, all that was needed to keep the shrubs from interfering with their neighbors was the use of "a knife in late winter." Apparently some did overstep their bounds. Beginning in the mid 1930s, many of the most "aggressive" were removed and grown on the stone walls. While working on the rearrangement of the shrubs in 1950, Farrand proposed letting "delicate creepers" such as species clematis and single roses scramble over the rock walls or climb trees. She thought that "loose growing crabapples, small cherries, or pears would please the clematis tribe" and asked to be provided with a list of "tree-climbing creepers."
WILSON AND THE SHRUB GARDEN
When E. H. Wilson's book about the Arboretum, America's Greatest Garden, was published in 1925, most of the chapters had fanciful titles such as “Spring Pageantry,” “Summer Luxuries,” “Cherry Blossom Festival,” “Crabapple Opulence,” and “Azalea Carnival.” By contrast, the chapter appearing second to last had the unadorned title “The Shrub Garden,” followed only by “What the Arboretum Does.” The chapter on the shrub collection opens with Wilson’s declaration that “A garden where the convenience of the public has to be shown preference, labors under disadvantages unknown to private gardens where landscape effects alone have to be considered.” Acknowledging that the shrub garden was established for the instruction of students, landscape gardeners, and plant lovers, and that its long, formal beds gave each plant ample room to develop, he described its arrangement as practical, convenient, and useful.

The design, he thought, did have some drawbacks: although every shrub was identified by name on two “boldly lettered” labels, one facing the grass paths on each side of the plant, some careless visitors made shortcuts across the beds and “many a small plant has carelessly been trodden to death as a consequence.” As to its location, he could not say enough. It was the coldest spot in the Arboretum in the winter, and the hottest in the summer; and because it was low-lying, its air drainage was the poorest, so that it suffered the first frosts in fall and the last frosts of spring. If nothing else, it made an splendid testing ground for plant hardiness—in Wilson's estimation, if a plant could survive in the Arboretum's shrub collection it would “withstand the winter's cold and summer's heat of any part of New England.” Regardless of its lack of “landscape beauty” and its less-than-ideal site, he thought there was probably “no more instructive a collection of shrubs in existence.”

Between Sargent’s death in 1927 and his own in 1930, Wilson, as “Keeper of the Arboretum,” dutifully took up authorship of the Bulletin. Of the shrub collection he wrote that it “is a never failing source of interest to all visitors, filled as it is with a general miscellany of shrubs.” He also liked to point out the attractiveness of various Asiatic representatives, many of which were his own introductions.

WYMAN AND THE SHRUB GARDEN
The collection's greatest champion since Sargent, Donald Wyman, was appointed horticulturist, a newly minted position, in 1936. In 1970, a year after his retirement, Wyman reflected on the state of horticulture at the Arboretum when he first arrived there, shortly after the deaths of both Sargent and Wilson, describing it as at an “all time low,” with a pronounced “lack of staff interest in the living collection.” In his opinion, “there was much work to be done.”


Wyman valued shrubs, as well as groundcovers, hedges, vines, small trees, “choice evergreens that never grow tall,” the best of flowering crabapples and lilacs, and all plants ornamental. As Sargent had championed trees, Wyman carried the banner for shrubs—his Shrubs and Vines for American Gardens came out two years before its much slimmer companion volume, Trees for American Gardens. A prolific author, his bibliography reflects his leanings: generally, the more ornamental a plant, the better, and even better yet if the plant was a shrub. He wrote articles about shrubs on the color, sequence of bloom, and seasonal interest of early, late, and summer blooming ones; he wrote about those not to be overlooked; those that were dwarf, fruited, and rare; and those that could be used for hedges or in the shade. He listed “Forty-five of the Best Shrubs for Massachusetts Gardens” in Arnoldia (1951, vol. 11, no. 1), suggesting that shrubs could “fill your garden with color,” but cautioning, in an October 1950 issue of Horticulture magazine...
A NEW COLLABORATION: WYMAN AND FARRAND

To help restore the collection, Beatrix Farrand was “added to the staff, on a retainer basis, as a consulting landscape gardener.” According to Donald Wyman, “Although many had tried to obtain permission to become consulting landscape architects,” she was the first landscape architect since Olmsted to work at the Arboretum. Farrand’s association with what she considered her alma mater had begun in the 1890s, when as a young student she had studied at the Arboretum under Sargent’s guidance. While Farrand may have known the collections well, in Ida Hay’s estimation her “grasp of the raison d’être behind the Arboretum’s original layout and subsequent development was somewhat sketchy.”

The Arboretum’s archives include much of Farrand’s correspondence and other writings regarding her plans for rejuvenating the collections. The notes she made after a visit to the Arboretum in the spring of 1947 include her first mention of possible changes to the shrub collection. “The remodeling of the present shrub collection should be done as soon as financially possible. All the formal beds in straight rows should be removed and the space now occupied by their stiff lines made into a big meadow, where moisture loving trees might be planted . . .” She pointed out that there was sufficient space nearby “to exhibit a collection of the best shrubs, choosing the most attractive varieties and relegating the less good sorts to the ‘study’ nursery whether at Weston [the recently acquired Case Estates] or elsewhere.” She also asked for a list of the shrubs (presumably from Dr. Wyman) “with comments on their attractiveness and their size and condition . . . some would be banished . . . and others, perhaps the newer sorts, would be added.” Wyman, just having successfully laid the shrub collection “to rest,” must have wondered just exactly where the role of the horticulturist intersected with that of the consulting landscape gardener. The Wyman-Farrand collaboration was to prove every bit as challenging as that of the earlier team of plantsman and landscape architect, Sargent and Olmsted.
In 1946, in an effort to eliminate hand labor and reduce costs, a "judicious arrangement" of the shrub collection's beds coupled with replacement of alternate grass walks with harrowed swaths and repositioned labels enabled the use of mechanized equipment and weed killers. A Ford-Ferguson tractor is seen here harrowing between the rows for weed control.

Donald Wyman experimented with a series of weed killers that ran the gamut from using flame throwers to "burn off" poison ivy to spraying sodium arsenate and sodium chlorate on annual weeds. He also introduced spent hops (probably acquired from local breweries in Jamaica Plain) as a weed-controlling mulch. In this photograph "Dowpon" (2,2-dichloropropionic acid) sprayed on the grass is used to edge the beds.

Donald Wyman and Beatrix Farrand did agree on the state of the grounds. Faced with an overcrowded and undermaintained landscape, they both saw a need for better management. While Wyman wanted to select the most ornamental material and weed out the rest, Farrand wanted to eliminate "duplicate and over-aged plants." But she too wished to "display to advantage the best and most ornamental of the plants now growing at the arboretum," according to her 1946 article "Contemplated Landscape Changes at the Arboretum."

Wyman did act on many of Farrand's suggestions. Although it bore no relationship at all to the Bentham and Hooker system, the azalea border along Meadow Road, arranged by color and designed by Farrand to present a sequence of bloom, was attractive and an instructional addition. The north slope of Peters Hill was rehabilitated, as was part of the top of Bussey Hill. The dogwoods were relocated, some along Bridal Path and others on Bussey Hill. The shrub collection itself, however, remained inviolate.

Between 1947 and 1952, while her other suggestions were being carried out, Farrand's proposed renovation of the collection was the subject of over fifteen letters between her and Karl Sax, the Arboretum's director. Sax thought at first that there "were some differences of opinion regarding this project. Wyman thinks that the present arrangement is much less..."
Beatrix Farrand envisioned a delicate rose arbor to replace the trellis, but the unanticipated relocation of the wisteria collection in 1951 required the construction of a very long, substantial edifice of cedar posts. Farrand, ever gracious, wrote to Sax inquiring about its design. “The news you have finished the arbor and planted the wisterias is thrilling. You are most secret as to what the arbor is made of, how large and long it is, so I am in a twitter to hear more about it.” Sax’s reply was less than enthusiastic: “The new arbor in the shrub collection looks a bit raw at present, but it will mellow with time, I hope. As is the case in all our work we have to make some compromise between expense, botanic garden objectives and landscape design.”

The next year, however, he wrote, “I can assure you that none of us like the rigid arrangement of the shrub collection, but if we are going to maintain the shrub collection on the Arboretum grounds there is not much alternative.” She argued the need “to consider the eventual elimination of these rigid beds, situated where Professor Sargent felt they were not wisely placed from the point of view of design.”

By 1950 Sax was asking if Farrand had “figured out how our 600–700 shrubs can be properly arranged in the available space?” She replied that “indeed I am struggling with the monumental problem of how to rearrange the 600–700 shrubs in a less gridiron manner” and asked, “Do the beds really need to be 20’ wide or could 10’ beds and 8’ walks be substituted?” She had calculated that she could fit in 665 shrubs, feeling that the number “can probably be squeezed up to the 700 by crowding some of the smaller species,” and she sent him a quick drawing. Receiving no reply she wrote, “Was the plan so bad that it has caused you to faint and fall by the wayside, or have you any comment on which we can start our drawing?”

Actually faced with a plan, even though it was only a sketch, Sax changed the thrust of his argument, now emphasizing maintenance costs as the reason for squelching the project. “Certainly the revised plan of the shrub collection is a great improvement in design, but the initial cost would be high and the subsequent maintenance
would be increased at least three-fold." His next letter assured her that "we realize the need for re-vamping the shrub collection . . . but it looks as though we are due for a continued and perhaps severe inflation. We do not want to develop projects which would add materially to future maintenance costs until we can see some way of meeting these financial obligations." She replied, "Indeed your dilemma and problem are most sympathetically understood here by a very aged and devoted friend of the Arboretum," but "Perhaps—and this is but a suggestion—it might be worth thinking over doing over a small section at a time . . ."

Only one more mention of the shrub collection appears in their correspondence. Sax wrote, in 1951, that another problem had arisen that would further complicate her revision: the wisteria collection had to be moved from the grounds of the Bussey Institution, requiring that a new arbor be quickly constructed adjacent to the shrubs. As Farrand’s plans had always included a design for the arbor—a very delicate design—the wisterias’ needs finally brought an end to the project.

Wyman’s recollections in “Horticulture at the Arnold Arboretum, 1936–1970” (Arnoldia vol. 30, no. 3) support the maintenance issues and raised additional objections that were perhaps not voiced in the 1950s. “When [Farrand] recommended that the shrub collection be removed and the shrubs planted in small groups in the same area, it became obvious to both Dr. Merrill and Dr. Karl Sax that some of her ideas, if carried out, would cost far too much in day-to-day maintenance. It has always been my strong conviction that landscape planning should be left to those on the staff who have had landscape training and who understand the diverse practical problems of maintaining the plantings."

Wyman used the shrub collection as a teaching tool and as an important resource in his famous series of Friday morning Arboretum “walks.” But with his retirement in 1969 the collection lost its spokesman and defender, and the next decade saw a decline in the number of new plantings. The diversity of the collection—always noted for its encyclopedic content—began to diminish, with large gaps appearing when aging plants died and were not replaced. The sharply edged grass paths had long since disappeared. Mechanized cultivators (rather than more careful human hands) had been used since the mid 1940s to keep weeds between the rows to a minimum; nonetheless, woody weeds began to overtake some of the specimen plants and the entire collection took on a forlorn and unkempt appearance.

THE FINAL CHAPTER

Peter Ashton’s arrival from Britain in 1979 to replace the retiring director, Richard Howard, coincided with a renewed interest in the design legacy of Frederick Law Olmsted. Assessing the grounds from this point of view, and with a knowledgeable and practiced eye for naturalistic landscapes, Ashton was astounded by the sight of the shrub collection. It had been so much a part of the Arboretum’s landscape for so long that no one on the staff questioned its existence, location, or design, but Ashton felt strongly that it not only jarred with the Olmsted design it was, in fact, an eyesore.

Investigations at what was soon to become the Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site turned up a full set of plans for the Arboretum that showed Olmsted’s original intentions for this part of the grounds. Ashton was excited by the opportunity to finally put the rose family in its rightful place, considering this a project that could initiate a restoration of the entire grounds to the Olmsted-Sargent plan. Through the generous bequest of Eleanor Cabot Bradley, a longstanding member of the Arboretum’s visiting committee and an avid plantswoman in her own right, the garden of rosaceous plants took shape on the site of the shrub collection. It had taken over a hundred years to implement the last piece of Olmsted’s plan; it would take two more decades, a new director, and another generous woman, Frances Leventritt, to find a new site and to perfect a design for the shrub and vine collection that realized Sargent’s goal for “a collection for investigation, which need not necessarily be permanent, and which should be arranged in a manner to permit the admission of . . . new forms and the removal of others which have served their purpose.”

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