

Bringing New Plants from Asia[©]

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It's a truism to say the public's appetite for things "new" is basically insatiable, whether it's demand for personal electronics, soap, or soapberries. Gardens and nurseries are constantly looking for new ways to attract customers. Of course, sometimes plants are "new" because they just don't survive from year to year. Notwithstanding the advances in garden center point-of-sale paraphernalia, such as colorful pots and giant picture tags, and botanical garden show features such as canopy walkways, we generally rely on novel — i.e., new — plants to satisfy, or indeed, to create demand.

Twenty-five years ago, University of British Columbia (UBC) Botanical Garden embarked on a program of plant introductions, drawing primarily on its significant collections of Mediterranean and alpine plants. The garden partnered with local nurseries to help propagate and distribute a huge range of plants to as wide an audience as possible. Garden staff also beat the bushes locally and around the world, identifying interesting local cultivars, and bringing them to Vancouver to propagate and distribute.

Today, however, the garden is a more botanically oriented institution. We continue to add new plants to the collections, but most of our new accessions are wild species and our motivation is primarily education and botanical research, not horticulture. There were several reasons for the shift away from horticulture, the most important of which were our shaky funding situation and the decline of horticulture as an academic program at UBC with the coincident decrease in support from the University. Understaffed and under-resourced, the garden was increasingly unable to find suitable new plants, market them competitively, and (perhaps most importantly) collect royalties to support the program.

Another key issue for the change in priority was the increasing opportunities for plant collecting in Asia. The prospect of acquiring species, many completely new to the West, and forging relationships with other botanical gardens and their scientists, was a powerful incentive. About this time, it was felt that amassing a comprehensive collection of Asian plants, and hence, increasing the garden's scientific legitimacy, was a more popular idea than collecting plants simply for their horticultural potential.

The climate in Vancouver is certainly conducive to growing a wide range of species from temperate Asia. Other botanical gardens and private collectors see UBC as the ideal garden for duplicate collections, whether for hardy plants from central China or coastal species from the islands south of Japan. As a consequence, for about a decade we were processing hundreds of wild accessions every year for the David C. Lam Asian Garden.

The person responsible for much of the influx of Asian plants was the curator of the Asian Garden at UBC, Peter Wharton (Fig. 1). He not only collected plants himself, but also developed a vast network of friends and associates who were willing to collaborate on expeditions and share plants with UBC from their own collections. Tragically, Peter died from cancer earlier this year. He was 57. Peter's approach

early on was to collect whatever he liked and thought might survive in Vancouver — a natural inclination for someone who needs to fill space in a garden, wants to learn more about a wide range of plants, and has unprecedented access to a huge number of species from the Orient. Peter was basically the proverbial kid in a huge and diverse botanical candy store.

Ultimately, we settled on a number of target groups, including *Magnolia*, *Acer*, *Sorbus*, and the *Styrax* family, among other groups, and we adopted a somewhat



Figure 1. Peter Wharton, curator of the Asian Garden at University of British Columbia.

more systematic approach to collecting. The shift to “wild” over cultivated plants also influenced to a great extent the propagation activities of the botanical garden nursery. While the plant introduction program was active, seed and vegetative propagation activities required approximately equal resources in the nursery, and the importation of live plants from overseas represented a significant cost to the garden. Now, the nursery is geared almost exclusively to seed propagation. Both Canadian and American plant protection

regulations are such that most seed is perfectly legal to import. And because the importation process is fairly straightforward, there are few impediments to importing whatever we want. The challenge is finding what we want.

While costs at the nursery are a fraction of what they once were because of the move to seed, those aren't the only costs we have to bear. A typical collecting trip requires months of preparation, target plants identified and their locations determined, itineraries established and travel arrangements made, travel and expedition funding nailed down, scientific collaborators and interpreters contacted, visas applied for, importation and other regulatory paperwork filled-out, equipment and supplies located, arrangements for replacement staff at the garden, and contingency plans determined.

Added to that are the concerns around being in unfamiliar territory. Unreasonable regulations, bad weather, unreliable transport, difficult terrain, pests, Spartan accommodations and unfamiliar food can all make traveling a real challenge for all but the seasoned adventurer. Nevertheless, traveling has its rewards. Our collaborators in the field include local guides, as well as professors and graduate students who are attached to local universities or botanical gardens. Local logistics are always better left in the hands of local people and experience has shown us that for particularly successful outcomes, personal relationships are significantly more useful than institutional ones.

Typically, any field collection we have been involved with includes pressed specimens for herbaria (usually at least three sets — one for the local institution, one for the federal institution, and one for us), dried tissue for DNA, digital images, written collection notes with global position system coordinates, and seeds. This is no small set of tasks, but ensuring that there are tangible benefits for the local participants and their institutions is one way to engender trust, save money, and expedite the goals of the expedition.

Ideally, the Botanical Garden would like proceeds from sales of collected plants to ultimately support projects in the countries of origin, such as research and plant development, or to provide support for students studying at the Botanical Garden.

However, the collection of fees or royalties derived from the sale of these plants is problematic, to say the least; particularly when newly collected plants of the same species are quickly available from commercial collectors who are seemingly not bound or at least bothered by the same regulatory and institutional impediments we have to negotiate.

Nevertheless, we're committed to making new plants available, because we think it's a good idea to spread good plants around, and we love to travel.