

New England Botanical Club – Minutes of the 932nd Meeting

7 November 1997 Prepared by Dr. Lisa A. Standley, Recording Secretary

The 705th meeting of the New England Botanical Club, Inc., being the 932nd since the original organization, met on Friday, Nov. 7, 1997 in the main lecture hall of the Biological Laboratories, Harvard University, with 47 members and guests present.

Following the reading of the minutes, President Hudson called for old business, new business, and gossip. Les Mehrhoff recommended a new book, "Weeds of the Northeast" by Richard Uva, Joseph Neal and Joseph DiTomaso, published by the Cornell University Press. Les reported that, although the book emphasizes agricultural weeds, it is illustrated with good photos, including seedlings. Don Hudson noted that two new members have recently joined the club, and that the Council is planning a symposium for April 1999, to focus on the biology of invasive plants. Any suggestions on speakers or specific topics would be welcome. President Hudson led a round of applause and congratulations for Janet Sullivan, editor of *Rhodora*, for her success in getting publication of *Rhodora* back on track. Maggie Bogle and Dave Conant were also recognized for their contributions to this effort.

David Conant introduced the evening's speaker, Dr. Stephen Spongberg of the Arnold Arboretum, on the topic "New Plants in Yankee Soils - An Abbreviated History of Plant Introduction from Eastern Asia". Dr. Harlan Banks, the scheduled speaker, was unable to appear because of an injury, but it is hoped he will be able to appear at the December meeting.

Steve began with an overview of the floristic diversity and complexity of eastern Asia. China, while roughly the same size as the continental US and at the same latitudes, contains three times the diversity of vascular plants, with a reported flora of over 30,000 species which, with Japan and Korea, is collectively the richest flora of the north temperate zone. This diversity has persisted in an extensively altered, intensive agricultural landscape.

The natural floristic relationships between eastern Asia and eastern North America were first noted by Linnaeus in 1750 in a thesis on the plants of Kamchatka, and were independently re-discovered by Asa Gray a century later. *Symplocarpus*, *Diphylleia*, and *Liriodendron* contain some of the most obvious disjunct species-pairs noted by both authors. Steve's topic, however, was the history of eastern Asian natives now cultivated in North America - a history influenced by religion, politics, and commerce more than by science.

Introductions from eastern Asia began in the 1750's, when the Dutch were able to import seeds of Ginkgo from China, where it existed only in cultivation on temple grounds. Jesuit missionaries, allowed to establish a mission in Beijing, sent back *Sophora japonica*, *Koelreuteria*, and *Ailanthus* (presumably with good intentions). Only after the end of the Opium Wars in 1842 were China's treaty ports opened to foreigners, when the Horticultural Society of London sent Robert Fortune to seek botanical novelties. Although limited to the treaty ports and Chinese garden flora, Fortune was responsible for the introduction of numerous asian cultivars of *Chrysanthemum*, *Camellia* and peonies, as well as woody ornamentals including *Hydrangea paniculata*. He also introduced *Dicentra spectabilis*, which was found in virtually every

European and North American garden in the late 19th century - despite being rare and endangered in China! Fortune's success was largely due to his use of Wardian Cases, traveling terraria that protected plants on sailing ships from wind and salt spray, and reduced the need to use precious fresh water on plants.

A Bavarian physician and botanist, Philipp von Siebold, was responsible for collecting a tremendous number of Japanese plants, despite being confined to the Dutch trading settlement on the island of Deshima. With George Rodgers Hall, a Harvard-trained doctor, he successfully introduced *Malus floribunda*, *Rosa rugosa*, *Rhododendron brachycarpum*, *Magnolia sieboldii*, *Wisteria floribunda*, *Taxus cuspidata*, and *Lilium auratum*. Hall's garden, still intact at his home in Bristol, RI, contains his original plant of *Taxus*, brought back from Japan in 1865.

During the same period, Father Jean Pierre Armand David, stationed at the Lazarist missionary in Beijing, was given the freedom to conduct scientific expeditions in remote areas of China. Father David sent botanical specimens to Paris that aroused considerable interest in collectors, particularly the plant named for him, *Davidia involucrata*.

The British nurseryman, James Veitch, began to send collectors to China in the late 1800s, most successfully Ernest Wilson. Wilson was the first to collect live material of *Davidia* and, on his second expedition, *Meconopsis integrifolia*. Charles Sargent, irked at having to buy plants from Veitch, visited Japan in 1892 and successfully introduced *Malus sargentii*, *Prunus sargentii*, and *Rhododendron kaempferi*. In 1905, Sargent hired Wilson and sent him to China, Japan and Korea on a series of collecting expeditions. Wilson's results included *Forsythia ovata*, *Corylopsis*, *Magnolia sargentii*, *Cornus kousa*, *Kolkwitzia*, *Stewartia*, *Acer griseum*, and *Lilium regale*. Wilson's collecting career ended with a severely broken leg (although this adventure resulted in his being the only botanist known to have been featured in Ripley's Believe it or Not).

The most recent eastern Asian introduction is *Metasequoia glyptostroboides*, the "dawn redwood", collected by Elmer Merrill, Director of the Arnold Arboretum, almost exactly fifty years ago - January 3, 1948. Following Merrill's expedition, China became essentially closed to foreigners again until after Nixon re-established relationships. The first joint Sino-American Botanical Expedition was held in 1980, and this collaboration continues with preparation of the first Flora of China.

The meeting adjourned at 8:10 PM for questions and refreshments.