

# THE ART OF COLLECTING TREES

## Arboretum Co-hosts Major Curation Symposium

Michael Dosmann, Curator of Living Collections

As North America's oldest public arboretum, the Arnold has a long history of curating living plant collections. Many of our current practices arose through trial, error, and refinement, and have been adopted or used as models in other gardens and arboreta. In addition to documenting our comprehensive collection of temperate woody plants, our mission also includes providing opportunities for educational enrichment. Last fall, these two roles were combined for the first time in a symposium dedicated specifically to the essentials of curating living plant collections. Held October 4-5, 2007, and attended by more than 100 curators, horticulturists, and other specialists, this event was sponsored by the American Public Gardens Association (APGA) and co-hosted by the Arnold Arboretum and Mount Auburn Cemetery. Featuring lectures as well as field demonstrations, the symposium was a landmark gathering in the interest of effective collections management and collaboration among public gardens and arboreta.

A symposium dedicated to living collections management can start with only one topic: the living collections policy. Tim Hohn of Edmunds Community College, WA, author of the new book *Curatorial Practices for Botanical Gardens*, presented a lecture and moderated a candid discussion on this theme, posing questions to a panel of professionals from a range of arboreta and gardens. This dialogue addressed not only how collections are assembled, but the ways they change over time and how institutions can best plan and carry out collection reviews and renovations.

An individual plant in a collection is only as valuable as the information attached to it—and the ease with which the information can be accessed. The central topics of documentation, mapping, and labeling were explored during sessions held at Mount Auburn Cemetery. Kerry Walter, the originator of the BG-Base™ living collections database, presented the first lecture, followed by two sessions on mapping and labeling led by Mount Auburn horticultural curator Dennis Collins.



Jon Herman

Performing scheduled field checks to verify the location, label needs, and health of plant accessions is an important component of curatorial work.

At the Arnold Arboretum, participants received training in three areas: taxonomic and nomenclatural verifications, field checking, and managing the flow of plants in the collection. Speakers from Longwood Gardens, Polly Hill, Scott Arboretum, and other botanic gardens joined Arboretum staff in discussing and demonstrating the critical tasks of accessioning, taxonomic verification, field checking, inventorying, and plant vouchering.

An open-house reception held in the Arboretum's Hunnewell Building featured many of the institution's archival treasures, including fascinating artifacts from the careers and travels of C. S. Sargent and E. H. Wilson. The gathering provided a terrific opportunity for introductions and informal discussions among participants and Arboretum staff. A final session summarized many of the themes of the symposium, particularly the future of curation, the training of new collection managers, and strategies to improve advocacy for collections.

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The success of the symposium was the result of collaborative efforts by the staffs of the Arnold Arboretum, Mount Auburn Cemetery, and the APGA. In addition to promoting cross-institutional cooperation, the event gave us a chance to take stock of our own work. While teaching others about some of our own curatorial methods, we

learned a great deal about those of our colleagues. The Arboretum can be proud of its curatorial work, but there is always room to learn, adapt, and improve. We are now undertaking a comprehensive review of our procedures to help us determine future directions in managing our important woody plants collection. 