This spring, visitors to the Arboretum will discover a whole new way to interact with the Arnold Arboretum and its renowned collection of plants—Expeditions, a mobile tour application, is set to debut on Lilac Sunday, May 10, 2020!

In 2014, the Arboretum debuted Other Order, a mobile app “sound walk.” The project—a collaboration between Arboretum Senior Research Scientist Emeritus Peter Del Tredici and sound artist Teri Reub—featured stories and sounds from Bussey Brook Meadow, a parcel of Arboretum land left largely unmaintained for purposes of long-term urban ecological study. Other Order was the Arboretum’s first foray into mobile app interpretation, harnessing new technologies to reach audiences in novel ways.

In the intervening years, mobile technology has become even more widespread and the concept for another app emerged. “Utilizing mobile app technology will greatly broaden our outreach capability,” says Kate Stonefoot, Arboretum Manager of Visitor Engagement. “Besides providing casual access to detailed, targeted information, there are profound benefits for individuals with hearing or sight impairments, as well as visitors for whom English is not their first language. With this in mind, and the help of a generous donation, we’ve embarked on the Expeditions project, which will allow us to share the story of the Arboretum and its world-renowned collection of trees in ways that will enhance the visitor experience.”

When I came to the Arboretum as Visitor Engagement Fellow, tasked with managing the development and launch of the Expeditions app, several things immediately became clear. First, it’s hard to narrow down 16,000 plants to a small selection! And second, the Arboretum’s staff, with their wide-ranging roles, are an incredible reserve of stories. “Behind each of our roughly 16,000 accessions lies a unique story—a story of journeys and collecting around the world, of amazing natural history, horticulture, and the aesthetic experience of observing our plants throughout the seasons and years,” said Director and Arnold Professor of Organismic and Evolutionary Biology William (Ned) Friedman. “Expeditions was designed to enrich the experience of interacting with our photosynthetic brethren.”

With the help of an editorial committee—composed of Stonefoot, Keeper of the Living Collections Michael Dosmann, Head of the Library and Archives Lisa Pearson, Editor of Arnoldia Jonathan Damery, and Associate Project Manager Danny Schissler—I began selecting which plants and areas would be featured in the Expeditions app.
Drawing on the Arboretum’s long tradition of docent-led tours, we created a structure featuring two linear tours (an introductory tour and a tour of the Explorers Garden, each with a series of highlighted plants) along with other independent plants and sites throughout the landscape.

Initial proposals for the app included plans for writing and recording scripted, museum-style audio segments for each stop on the two linear tours. In addition to those segments, I proposed that we interview staff members, recording stories about their work at the Arboretum in their own voices. As a result, more than fifty interview segments share these personal reflections throughout Expeditions. Gardener Brendan Keegan addresses the ecological benefits of the Arboretum’s meadow areas, which provide habitat for pollinators and wildlife. Nature Education Specialist Ana Maria Caballero describes teaching schoolchildren about the components of pond habitats. And Del Tredici tells stories of collecting plant material around the world, from a rain-soaked mountainside in rural China to the intersection of Interstate 95 and the Massachusetts Turnpike, eight miles from the Arboretum. The Arboretum’s diversity of voices allowed us to leverage specialized expertise among our staff and helped us highlight the concepts and values we wanted to illustrate about the Arboretum—history, conservation, research—and of course, plant exploration.

In structuring the app’s content, we created something flexible. If you want to follow a linear tour from the Hunnewell Building to the ponds, you can opt for the Introductory Tour, with eleven “stops”—featured plants or areas—along Meadow Road. If you want to chart your own course, you can explore and visit up to thirty-five independent stops featured throughout the landscape. You also have a range of options to select from at each stop—you can view images, listen to audio clips, and “dig deeper” by accessing additional content pages. The app’s content will be translated into Spanish and Simplified Chinese. Users will have the option to download the app for free or access the content on an internet browser.

We’re excited to share Expeditions this spring with Arboretum visitors. The app has something for everyone, from the first-time visitor to the most seasoned volunteer. Sharing stories from across the Arboretum’s departments—from horticulture to curation to research to education—illustrates that anyone can develop meaningful relationships with trees. By demonstrating the many complex ways we think about and learn from plants, we hope to encourage visitors to build connections not only to the trees they encounter in our landscape, but to their counterparts everywhere.

---

This Lilac Sunday and beyond, please join us on Expeditions!

Expeditions will debut to the public as part of festivities for Lilac Sunday 2020 at the Arnold Arboretum: Sunday, May 10 from 10am to 3pm. The app will be available for download in the Google Play and Apple app stores. Either download Expeditions to your personal device before arriving at the Arboretum, or connect to the public wi-fi network in our Visitor Center. The app’s content will also be accessible through any internet browser, including your personal devices.

See more information about Lilac Sunday on page 18.