For a plant to support research and conservation activities at the Arnold Arboretum, it helps a great deal to know about its past. The value and utility of a specimen in our living collections remains inextricably linked to documentation on where it was collected and who collected it. While a red oak (*Quercus rubra*) growing spontaneously in one of the Arboretum's natural woodlands may stand out more than a humble shrub like Chinese neililia (*Neillia sinensis*), it is the latter plant—collected by E. H. Wilson on his first expedition for the Arboretum in Western Hubei, China—that offers the most to scientists through the rigorous documentation that begins when a seed or seedling is gathered from the wild.

Just as we can learn much about a plant from its backstory, knowing the history of acquisition at a collecting institution like the Arboretum can improve the outcome of future efforts. As the 2014-15 Curatorial Fellow, I’ve led an ongoing project to study the impact of the Arboretum’s pioneering contributions to plant exploration while crafting a system to track, document, and publish results from our ongoing expeditionary work. The project originated with a question—*How many collecting expeditions have been mounted by and with the Arnold Arboretum?* Surprisingly, staff in our Curatorial Department and Library could not answer definitively, perhaps mainly because methods used to source plants over the past 150 years have been nearly as diverse as the collected taxa. For example, Joseph Rock lived and explored China’s extensive flora for three decades (1920-1949), while Walter Siehe was contracted specifically to find a single taxon: the hardy Cedar of Lebanon (*Cedrus libani* ssp. *stenocoma*) in the early 1900s. Defining “expedition” to denote instances when something was collected and added to either the Arboretum’s living collections or herbarium, we created categories to describe individual events more accurately—from contracted trips by non-Arnold Arboretum staff to multi-year campaigns focused on a specific geographic region.

Our research to quantify and document each expedition took me from the Arboretum’s Archival Collections and plant records database to direct observations of living plants and pressed specimens. A prime resource were the Arboretum’s annual Director’s Reports dating back to 1873. We also consulted trip reports, collecting lists, and written correspondences between collectors in the field and colleagues back home. All of this revealed that, to date, the Arboretum has supported 153 expeditions, campaigns, or contracts, conducted in 73 countries and territories, by 81 staff members and numerous collaborators. We expect these numbers will grow as staff in our curatorial department and library review additional archival resources, and of course with each new collecting effort in the future.

Beyond our comprehensive inventory of collection events, we also gathered details such as duration, geographical locations, and individual participants. In many cases this allowed us to add to the information held in our plant database, greatly expanding the scope of information we share with researchers and the public about these collections. Improved documentation of each accession’s origin—referred to as “passport data”—also allows us to better evaluate our plant performance in the landscape and improve our approach to both plant acquisition and collections management.

In addition to enhancing our curatorial and archival records, we created a useful online resource highlighting *Expeditions Unveiled* for public access to our rich history of botanical exploration. Slated for launch this autumn, this content includes written accounts, photographs, and maps to weave a rich story of our collectors in the field and the impact of their work on the Arboretum and its holdings. As the Arboretum continues to collect plants around the world over the next decade and beyond, we will continue to share the results of these efforts to document natural history and guide the future of plant exploration.