There is something to be said about studying and collecting plants from the wild. No matter how detailed a species description may be in a published flora, the written word always pales in comparison with what you gain by encountering a tree in nature. Seeing firsthand the diverse habitats where the more common plants dominate, or the peculiar spots where the rarities grow, can be truly enlightening, particularly in planning future planting sites for the species back at the Arboretum. Likewise, while a certain shrub may dazzle when planted in the garden, it may fade into the scrub while in the wild, illustrating how good horticulture can enhance a species’ genetic potential. It is like finding a diamond in the rough.

As a curator and plant fanatic, these are all good reasons to seek new plants from their native habitats—to say nothing of how crucial a wild pedigree is to increasing a plant’s value to science. Thus the Arnold Arboretum continues to mount annual expeditions in search of viable germplasm—seeds, cuttings, and even seedlings—from wild populations. Last fall for a week in early October, I joined fellow plant explorers Anthony Aiello (Director of Horticulture and Curator at the Morris Arboretum of the University of Pennsylvania), and Timothy Boland and Ian Jochems (Executive Director and Horticulturist, respectively, at Polly Hill Arboretum on Martha’s Vineyard) on a collecting expedition in Arkansas. Rounding out

**Natural State Natives**

A collaborative expedition sourced plants from the Ozark and Ouachita Mountain regions of Arkansas—an area of interest for Arboretum plant collectors since the time of Charles Sprague Sargent

*Michael S. Dosmann, Ph.D, Curator of Living Collections*
our team was Arkansas Natural Heritage Commission Botanist Theo Witsell, whose intimate knowledge of local flora proved invaluable.

Arkansas’ nickname (The Natural State) is no ruse. A largely rural state punctuated by a few large cities like Little Rock and Fayetteville, Arkansas offers abundant natural areas spanning the bottomlands of the southeast to the highlands of the northwest. It was this latter region that we explored, particularly the lowland forests of the Ouachita and Ozark Mountains. This area—which includes the Ozarks’ extension into Missouri—features high botanical diversity and has historically yielded wonderful additions to the Arboretum. Living collections from the region can be traced back to founding Arboretum director Charles Sprague Sargent, although perhaps the most notable derive from botanist Ernest Jesse Palmer’s numerous expeditions in the area.

Armed with a wish list or desiderata established ahead of the trip, our team visited natural areas known to harbor populations of specific plants. Advanced planning can go a long way in making an expedition successful, and our efforts were rewarded through collections of 34 different species, including 13 not represented in the Arnold Arboretum’s living collection. These additions are a boon to our efforts to broaden the species diversity of our holdings. Furthermore, we have an institutional priority that for each species grown, it should be represented by at least one accession of documented wild origin. The trip yielded additional species that fall into this category, bringing with them their native backstories and increasing their usefulness as individuals for study. Included in this group are Itea virginica, a shrub known as Virginia sweetspire, and Quercus lyrata, the overcup oak. Originally discovered by Palmer in 1924 on Magazine Mountain in Arkansas, this species is considered one of the rarest oaks in North America. Our group visited one of four known remaining populations to investigate its status in the wild and to collect herbarium vouchers and acorns.

Whenever possible, a multi-institutional trip like this one offers an ideal approach. For one, it makes fiscal sense to share direct costs, like renting a suitable vehicle for transportation to and between sites. There is also the adage that “many hands make light work,” and sharing job responsibilities and expertise before, during, and after the expedition ensures both efficiency and success. It is important to note that the majority of the work only begins after the trip is over—seeds need to be cleaned and sown, herbarium specimens processed and mounted, and the important trip journal and reports written and published. Additionally, because multiple institutions grow the resulting plants, there is an automatic insurance policy in case some seeds fail to germinate or seedlings do not grow well at one of our institutions—duplicate seedlings or even cuttings from the original can be redistributed in future years to gardens that need them. In coming years, there will be much for us to learn and enjoy by seeing how these plants from the Natural State grow and perform under Bay State conditions.