Arboretum Launches Plant Image Project “Treeversity”

BOSTON, MA: If a picture is worth a thousand words, than the Arnold Arboretum of Harvard University is preparing to share more details than ever before about its 15,000 collected plants. The best part—you can help make it happen! This fall, the Arboretum launches “Treeversity,” a citizen science project designed to collect information on some 20,000 images of the trees, shrubs, and vines growing across its Olmsted-designed landscape.

Since its founding in 1872, Arboretum staff have utilized photography to help document the living plants the institution collects, grows, and preserves for scientific study and horticultural display. Thousands of historical images—captured by famed explorers like Ernest Henry Wilson, Joseph Rock, and Frank Meyer—have long been available for viewing and downloading through VIA, the Visual Information Archive of the Harvard University Libraries. Recently, the Arboretum made thousands of contemporary images of its plants—from *Abelia chinensis* (Chinese abelia) to *Zenobia pulverulenta* (honeycup)—available on its own website (www.arboretum.harvard.edu). This extensive Plant Image Database serves everyone from botanists to armchair plant explorers as a free online tool to aid plant identification, connect plant images and plant information, and promote the study and appreciation of biodiversity.

To make this resource more useful to scientists, teachers, students, gardeners, and anyone interested in learning more about plants, the Arboretum has teamed with Zooniverse (www.zooniverse.org), the world’s largest online platform for people-powered research. Zooniverse crowd-sources data collection for scientific studies, utilizing the help of hundreds of thousands of volunteers who log on to assist professional researchers. On October 3, Zooniverse will begin hosting Treeversity, a project the Arboretum hopes will inspire plant enthusiasts and biodiversity champions to contribute descriptive metadata for the plant images it shares. By selecting appropriate subject categories—flower, leaf, fruit, cone, thorn, bark—Treeversity volunteers will expand essential browsing and searching functions of the Arboretum’s Plant Image Database.

Treeversity will launch on Zooniverse with approximately 10,000 images in need of categorization by volunteers. Once the project is completed, the Arboretum’s Plant Image Database will have improved functionality as an educational resource—and another important layer of documentation on the Arboretum’s renowned living collections. As a constantly developing resource for reference and discovery, the Plant Image Database will continue to develop as additional digital archives become available. “Our goal,” according to Arboretum Director William (Ned) Friedman, “is to share these images in classrooms, with garden clubs, and with all manner of plant lovers around the world to help advance a cure for the preventable human disease known as plant blindness.”

Founded in 1872 as the first public arboretum in North America, the Arnold Arboretum of Harvard University is a leading center for the study of plants and biodiversity and a 281-acre landscape open to the public year round. One of the most comprehensive and best documented collections of temperate woody plants in the world, the Arboretum promotes the understanding and appreciation of plants through world-class research and educational programs for all ages.

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