April is the perfect month to catch the bright flowering of Forsythia. Spring is manifest in these golden-flowered, deciduous shrubs, and the Arnold Arboretum Horticultural Library curates a number of brilliant Ektachrome color images of Forsythia like the one featured here, captured by an unknown photographer on Beech Path looking toward the ponds, available through Harvard’s online catalog, HOLLIS Images.

Named for William Forsyth (1737–1804), Scottish horticulturalist and founding member of the Royal Horticultural Society in London, the genus Forsythia consists of fewer than a dozen species native mainly to Asia. According to British garden writer Stuart Phillips, Forsythia correlates in plant lore with “anticipation, good nature, [and] innocence.” The link between Forsythia and the anticipation of spring makes perfect sense, as the Arboretum’s collection beckons visitors each April to admire its spectacular display along the bank where Forest Hills Road meets Bussey Hill Road and begins its rise into the lilacs.

Plant explorer Robert Fortune introduced Forsythia to the West in 1844. Nautical transport during this era proved a challenge, as the specimens required sunlight and protection from saltwater spray. Fortune used Wardian cases (solariums) to protect his Forsythia plants during their long journey to Europe from Asia by way of Cape Horn.

Forsythia has a storied legacy at Arnold Arboretum, starting with Ernest Henry Wilson’s 1918 introduction of Korean forsythia (F. ovata), and the hybridization endeavors of Karl Sax during the 1930s and 1940s. Cultivars within the hybrid group F. × intermedia include ‘Beatrix Farrand’, ‘Arnold Giant’, ‘Karl Sax’, and ‘Primulina,’ a pale-flowered variety and chance discovery of Arboretum research taxonomist Alfred Rehder (1863-1949) in 1912.

Today the Forsythia collection at the Arboretum comprises eighty-five plants belonging to sixty accessions; in all, the thirty-four taxa include eleven species, three varieties, and twenty-two cultivars. Taken together, the plants represent a national collection accredited by the American Public Gardens Association’s Plant Collections Network—one of eight such collections at the Arboretum (see related story, page 6).

Early bloomers in New England need to be quite tough, and Forsythia delivers with considerable hardiness in urban settings. Its spreading habit and dense root systems have provided erosion control in several hillside locations at the Arboretum. Their precocious floral display also helps distinguish them in the landscape at the start of the growing season. Seek out the collection during your next visit to the Arboretum, and remember to stop by the horticultural library, where we curate a wealth of information about Forsythia and other spring favorites. 

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