A Continuing Legacy
Hybrid Marvels of Wilson Plant Introductions

Michael Dosmann, Curator of Living Collections

When it comes to plant explorers, few are as celebrated as the Englishman Ernest Henry Wilson, who on behalf of the venerable nursery Veitch and Sons conducted two impressive plant collecting expeditions to China. In 1907 he began his tenure with the Arnold Arboretum, returning to China two more times, and carrying out one trip to Japan and another to Japan, Korea, and Taiwan over the next 15 years. These six expeditions were amazingly successful based on the number of herbarium specimens he collected and germplasm (mostly seed, though some plants and cuttings) collections he gathered. Among his numerous introductions are noteworthy ornamentals such as the dove tree (Davidia involucrata), the royal lily (Lilium regale), the paperbark maple (Acer griseum), the tea crabapple (Malus hupehensis), and the beautybush (Kolkwitzia amabilis)—a personal favorite of the explorer (see back cover: In the Collection). These taxa, and countless others, are grown and revered not only in arboreta and botanical gardens, but in home gardens and landscapes as well.

Wilson plants, as they are often known, have been written about profusely since their introductions. Innumerable profiles about them have regularly appeared in issues of Arnoldia, and its predecessor The Bulletin of Popular Information, as well as the popular press and gardening literature. Wilson himself was a prolific author, and his book China—Mother of Gardens rests on my shelf within easy reach, as does another impressive treatise, Plantae Wilsonianae, the three-volume book edited by Charles Sprague Sargent enumerating those species collected by Wilson during his four trips to China.

However, when examining the impact of Wilson’s (or anyone’s) exploration efforts, it is important to realize two things. While some of the scientific and horticultural benefits are immediate, many are not realized for decades. And those impacts may extend well beyond the lives of the initial introductions, particularly if plant breeding is involved. Here at the Arnold Arboretum a number of Wilson plants have played prominent parental roles in both spontaneous and intentional hybridizations. The term “hybrid vigor” exists for a reason, and these are but three robust examples among many such Wilson legacies. No doubt, there are others still to be found, some of which might reveal themselves yet this year, and others which may not be realized for another 100 years.

Hamamelis × intermedia ‘Arnold Promise’
In 1863, Philipp Franz von Siebold introduced Hamamelis japonica, the Japanese witch hazel. A large spreading shrub, this species produces early spring flowers of yellowish hue, though generally not in profusion. However, its showier relative from China, Hamamelis mollis, received a great deal of acclaim following its introduction in 1878 by Charles Maries. In April of 1907, while exploring in Western Hubei Province, Wilson also observed a H. mollis in bloom with distinguished golden yellow petals and chocolate bases. He returned to the same site in November, collected seed, and sent it back to the Arboretum, where it was initially accessioned in February of 1908. This fine-looking specimen caught the eye of William Judd, Arboretum propagator, who in 1928 collected open-pollinated seeds and germinated them the following spring. However, all of the resulting seedlings...
appeared unusual, sharing traits with both the maternal *H. mollis* and what turned out to be a nearby paternal plant of *H. japonica*. In 1945, after collectively examining these seedlings, Alfred Rehder described the new hybrid as *Hamamelis × intermedia*. In 1963, after yet several more decades of evaluation, one of these seedlings growing near the Hunnewell Building was selected for its superiority and introduced as ‘Arnold Promise’. Among its spectacular qualities are consistent prolific displays of bright yellow, spicy-scented flowers, at times beginning in January and lasting to March. The upright and spreading shrub maintains a wonderful form, and in the autumn the leaf color is bright yellow.

**Forsythia ‘Meadowlark’**

In 1918, Wilson introduced the early forsythia, *Forsythia ovata*, from the Diamond Mountains of Korea. The initial Arboretum accession was instantly appreciated for its reliable flower-bud hardiness and bright yellow blooms. Through the 1930s and 1940s, Karl Sax began to experiment with the Wilson plant, crossing it with a variety of other forsythias including *F. ‘Arnold Giant’*, itself a product of his previous breeding work. Among the progeny of the cross between *F. ovata* and *F. ‘Arnold Giant’* was one choice plant christened in 1956 as *Forsythia ‘Beatrix Farrand’*. However, it was a non-descript hybrid between *F. ovata* and *F. europaea* made by Sax and his assistant Haig Derman in 1935 that was to become, in time, remarkable. During the particularly frigid winter of 1966-67, Harrison Flint noticed that while the entire mass planting of *Forsythia × intermedia ‘Spectabilis’* on forsythia bank failed to flower due to winter injury, a lone shrub was in full floral display. This plant was the handiwork of Sax and Derman three decades before. Flint propagated it, and USDA trials found it hardy to at least -35°F. In 1984 the hybrid was registered as *Forsythia ‘Meadowlark’*, and it can be found in northern landscapes where minimum temperatures limit the plant palette.

**Stewartia ‘Scarlet Sentinel’**

The beautiful Japanese stewartia, *Stewartia pseudocamellia*, with its camellia-like flowers and sinewy, exfoliating bark, was initially introduced from Japan by Thomas Hogg in 1874. In 1917, while he was exploring the Korean Peninsula during his final trip to East Asia, Wilson collected seed of *Stewartia koreana*, which is now considered just a geographic variant of *S. pseudocamellia* with greater cold hardiness. The collection was accessioned by the Arboretum in January of 1918, and two extraordinary specimens still grow on Bussey Hill on Chinese Path. Nearby is another fine specimen of the North American *S. ovata* var. *grandiflora* known for its flowers of purple stamens, yet non-descript bark. Peter Del Tredici, eager to acquire a *S. pseudocamellia*, collected a seedling from below the Wilson tree in 1982, on the assumption it was true to type. However, its performance prior to blooming could be liberally summed up as lackluster, particularly because its bark was far from showy—a primary reason one would wish to grow the species. When the plant did flower in 1992, its true colors (figuratively and literally) were revealed: in the center of the large flowers were vibrant scarlet anther filaments instead of the purplish or yellow filaments of *S. ovata* var. *grandiflora* and *S. pseudocamellia*, respectively. In 2002, this spontaneous hybrid was introduced as *Stewartia ‘Scarlet Sentinel’*. 