

E. H. Wilson's Legacy of Chinese Plants at Willowood Arboretum

He made outstanding contributions in exploration, in the introduction of valuable plants to cultivation, and in the literature of horticulture, thereby enriching us all and particularly the American people. His place in the horticultural world will not be filled.

Liberty Hyde Bailey

Ernest Henry Wilson's (1876-1930) reputation today is certainly that of one of the most successful plant hunters having collected over 100,000 specimens of more than 5,000 species, and seeds of 1,500 different plants. Over 1000 species of these were horticultural plants from China, new to Western gardens; these have since become established in the horticultural trade.

Born in Chipping Camden, Gloucestershire, England in 1876, Wilson went to work as a gardener at the Birmingham Botanic Garden at eighteen, later he worked at the Royal Botanic Garden at Kew, the most famous botanic garden in the world. This background helped him to be chosen, at the age of twenty-three, in 1899 by a famous English nursery, Veitch & Sons, to travel to China to bring back seeds of hardy ornamental plants for British gardens. For political reasons this was a dangerous time for Westerners to be traveling in China; hundreds of local people had been killed, foreign missionaries were murdered and entire villages had been burned to the ground. Nevertheless in February 1900, Wilson purchased a boat, hired assistants and began traveling up the Yangtze River to access the interior region of western China. After traveling upstream for nearly 1000 miles through springtime floods and rapids he established a home base at Ichang, down river from the famous Yangtze Gorges. His principal areas of collecting were in the provinces of Hubei, Szechuan and Yunnan. On this trip Wilson collected seeds of 305 plant species (some you will soon be viewing) and 900 herbarium (dried plant) specimens of many other plants before returning to England in April of 1902, his trip acclaimed as a great success.

During June of 1902 he married Ellen (Nellie) Ganderton and they would raise one daughter. In January of 1903 he was off to China again collecting for the Veitch nursery, returning home in March of 1905 with seeds collected from over 500 different plants and 1,500 herbarium specimens. Wilson's third expedition to China was for the Arnold Arboretum of Harvard University in Boston lasting from December of 1906 until April of 1909 and focused on the rugged mountainous regions in the western provinces of Szechwan and Hubei and brought back 2,200 packages of seeds, plus 1400 live plants and cuttings and 2500 herbarium specimens. Wilson's fourth expedition to China began in March of 1910 and would unfortunately be cut short that September due to his getting caught in a sudden rock slide in the remote wilderness of the Sino-Tibetan border. This resulted in multiple breaks of bones in his leg, a serious six-week long infection and discussion of amputation, but with an operation by a surgeon the leg was saved although his right leg would be an inch shorter and he walked with a slight limp for the rest of his life. Still, he brought back over 1200 packages of seeds and more herbarium specimens

Wilson returned to work at the Arnold Arboretum for the rest of his life, cataloging his thousands of herbarium specimens, writing books, journals and magazine articles. In later years he recommenced traveling and collecting plants in Japan, Korea Australia, New Zealand, Malaysia and South Africa. It was during 1928-29 that Wilson corresponded with and provided plants to Robert and Henry Tubbs, founders of Willowood Arboretum.

Not all of Wilson's introductions succeeded in cultivation either in the United States or Europe. Some grew at first but eventually died out, unable to adapt to environments outside their native habitats. Others thrived in England but failed in the United States. However, many of Wilson's introductions are currently available in the nursery trade.

==Lesley Parness