

# Project Wilson- 2005

## Tree Forum on Wilson's Legacy

At the PlantNetwork Tree Forum on 22 June 2005 at Kew, Tony Kirkham gave an outline of the collecting expeditions of Ernest Henry Wilson (1876–1930) and his phenomenal achievements. Augustine Henry had sent back numerous herbarium specimens from China and repeatedly urged William Thistleton-Dyer, Kew's Director, to send someone out to collect living material. In discussions with the Veitch Nursery firm, Thistleton Dyer nominated E H Wilson, a recent graduate of Kew. Wilson undertook two expeditions in the employ of Veitch before being 'head-hunted' by Charles Sprague Sargeant, Director of the Arnold Arboretum, for whom two further expeditions took place. In addition, Wilson visited Japan, Korea and Taiwan in 1914–18, taking his family with him on some of his trips.

E H Wilson was one of the most important plant collectors of the twentieth century, his expeditions resulting in the introduction of so many of the trees and shrubs contributing to the beauty and interest of our gardens today. As well as introducing over 1000 plant species, he collected more than 18 000 herbarium specimens, made over 5000 glass-plate photographs and wrote eight books on plant collecting and gardening. Charles Sargeant gave him his first camera, and later the Arnold Arboretum published four volumes of his photographs, now an invaluable reference source.

Mark Flanagan told us about Wilson's adventures in China (in western Hubei and western Sichuan) – the places he visited and some of the plants he saw in 1899–1902, 1903–05, 1907–09 and 1910–11. He explained the difficulties in establishing and retracing his itinerary – the place names have changed and the records at the time were not always precise – and some of the data sources available. Mark and Tony plan to retrace one of these expeditions in June 2006, matching Wilson's photographs to what's there now.

David Knott described some of the many Wilson accessions at the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh. F R S Balfour, the owner of Dawyck in 1890–1945, subscribed to Wilson's expeditions, but there are few reliable records. He showed us slides of *Meliosma beaniana*, *Ilex fargesii* and *Malus hupehensis* (all introduced in 1908), various rhododendrons and acers and many more. He and Ross Kerby commented on how some of the plants had subsequently been propagated.

In a walk round the Arboretum at Kew, we looked at a number of trees and considered the need for them to be propagated, e.g. *Catalpa fargesii*, *Gleditsia sinensis*, *Poliothyrsis sinensis*, *Tetradium daniellii*, *Liriodendron chinense*, *Carpinus turczaninowii* and *Castanea henryi*.

In a lively discussion, the difficulty in establishing which were authentic Wilson introductions and when and where they were collected was recognised: the collector's numbers and records often lack detail.

The Tree Forum agreed that PlantNetwork should carry out a project to:

- locate Wilson introductions in the UK and record the details in a database (there would be probably be several categories, some authentic and others with less-precise records)
- set up a programme to propagate original Wilson plants (starting with those easy to propagate) and distribute the propagules to be grown by PlantNetwork members in gardens and arboreta throughout Britain and Ireland, to keep them in cultivation
- seek opportunities to celebrate Wilson's legacy, e.g. through a co-ordinated programme of events, trails and interpretation in PlantNetwork gardens, and perhaps a Wilson seminar; there are several significant dates in Wilson's life that could be marked and act as a focus over the next few years.

Details of the proposed project will be discussed by the PlantNetwork Board, with a view to seeking funding to carry it out. The idea is to conserve the heritage of the actual plants that Wilson collected, rather than conserving the species *per se*. Many of his early introductions are now mature and some are endangered in the wild. Wilson risked life and limb to collect them. The least we can do is to take measures to keep them in cultivation.

## Project Wilson – Conserving the Heritage

On 3 September 1910, whilst seeking out plants of *Lilium regale*, the famous plant hunter Ernest Henry Wilson was caught in a rockslide in the precipitous Min River valley in Sichuan and sustained a compound fracture of his right leg. Being many miles from medical assistance, Wilson was in a perilous situation and it was only the dedication of his Chinese assistants that eventually saw him through. The accident brought to an end Wilson's plant-collecting activities in China and left him with a permanent disability, or 'lily limp' as Wilson termed it.

During his time in China, Wilson had almost single-handedly changed the face of western gardens. No lesser judge than W J Bean declared that 'of trees and shrubs for the British climate, Wilson introduced more than any other collector'. In numerical terms, he collected over 1000 plant species.

A century later, the number of original Wilson plants in British gardens is small and many are in need of propagation if they are not to be lost forever. There appears to have been no concerted effort to find out where his surviving plants are growing or to initiate a propagation programme.

Having trod the same lonely paths through the mountains of central and western China, I feel a special affinity with E H Wilson, a sentiment that is shared by many others who have enjoyed similar experiences. In this, Wilson's centenary decade, it seems appropriate to reconsider his legacy and take steps to preserve the heritage of plants he bequeathed us.

The primary objective of the PlantNetwork Tree Forum workshop at Kew on 22 June (see p.17) was to raise awareness of the dwindling number of Wilson's original introductions. Myself, Tony Kirkham and David Knott were keen to test the interest and appetite of Forum members

for a series of initiatives to reverse this decline and ensure that Wilson's legacy is conserved for future generations.

Following positive discussions, the workshop agreed to:

- 1 develop a database of Wilson's collections in the British Isles
- 2 initiate a programme to repropagate original Wilson plants
- 3 distribute the resulting propagules amongst PlantNetwork members, for planting in key gardens and arboreta around the country.
- 4 celebrate and interpret Wilson's legacy over the next few years, to mark significant dates in his life.

Clearly a range of other benefits can result from these activities. Consider the case of *Meliosma beaniana*. Wilson records seeing this attractive pinnate-leaved tree, only four times in the wild. Today, its status in China is uncertain. An example survives in the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh (W A154), collected by Wilson in western Hubei in 1907. The propagation of this tree is imperative not only to ensure that this taxon is not lost to cultivation, but also to conserve its unique genetic characteristics. Equally, as propagated plants become available, they offer gardens the opportunity for new themes for their collections – a Wilson border – and events to celebrate his life and achievements.

Anyone wishing to participate in this exciting project should contact me at the address below. The Tree Forum is interested to hear of gardens and arboreta that grow authentic or suspected Wilson plants. We need help with the propagation and growing-on of plants and we also need safe homes to conserve plants for the future.

E H Wilson, we're on the case!

*Mark Flanagan*