

Tree of the Month – May 2012

Dove tree (*Davidia involucrata*)

Every month we highlight one of the trees in our collection. This month we have selected the dove tree (*Davidia involucrata*).

Dove tree is a medium-sized deciduous tree with mottled, flaking bark. The common name refers to the distinctive white flowers, consisting of two large drooping white bracts (modified leaves) surrounding a small round flower head. When the wind blows, the bracts resemble fluttering doves. Other common names include ghost tree, handkerchief tree and laundry tree.

The dove tree is native to China. It was first documented by French missionary Père Armand David in 1869. Later, a botanist named Dr. Augustine Henry found one tree high in the mountains in central China, “waving its innumerable ghost handkerchiefs”¹. Dr. Henry sent cuttings to Kew in 1891, but no seeds. Wealthy nursery man Harry James Veitch wanted to introduce the tree to horticulture, so in 1899 he hired Ernest Henry Wilson, a 22-year-old student at the Royal Botanic Gardens, to go to China, find Dr. Henry’s tree, and bring back viable seeds.

Wilson travelled to Shanghai and took a steamer boat up the Yangtze River to Yichang in Hubei province. There he purchased a Chinese houseboat and hired a crew and a large staff of porters and collectors. Using a map drawn up by Dr. Henry, Wilson and his team located the tree: it had been cut down and used to build a little house!

Not one to be discouraged, Wilson considered taking his expedition to the place where Pére David found his trees in 1869, which would require a 1000 mile journey west. Luckily, “[o]n May 19 when collecting near the hamlet of Ta-wan, distant some five days southwest of [Yichang], [he] suddenly happened upon a [*Davidia*] tree in full flower! It was about 50 feet tall, in outline pyramidal, and with its wealth of blossoms was more beautiful than words can portray.”²

He collected thousands of seeds and sent them back to Mr. Veitch in England. The seedlings bloomed in 1911, and received awards from the Royal Horticultural Society.

At VanDusen we have three dove trees, and they can be found at the foot of the Rhododendron walk and in the Sino-Himalayan Garden. For exact locations, please see the map on the back of this handout.

Quotes:

1. *The Flowering World of “Chinese” Wilson*, by Daniel J. Foley, 1969, page 23
2. *The Flowering World of “Chinese” Wilson*, by Daniel J. Foley, 1969, page 22

Other Sources:

Wilson’s China: A Century On, by Mark Flanagan & Tony Kirkham, 2009

“Chinese” Wilson: A life of Ernest H. Wilson, 1876-1930, by Roy W. Briggs, 1993