

Wilson's Magnolias

by Richard A. Howard

At the time of his death in 1930 E. H. Wilson was writing a new book tentatively entitled "Wilson's Plants in Cultivation." Recently the unpublished manuscript has been given to the Arnold Arboretum by Wilson's granddaughter, Mrs. John R. Abbott (nee Barbara Slate). Her kindness in making this manuscript available will be even more appreciated as the material is studied.

Wilson had chosen several hundred of his introductions, primarily trees and shrubs, as those of which he was

most proud. His comments on these plants involve his experiences in finding them, his methods of shipping the material, their distribution and behavior in cultivation as he knew it, and best of all, his personal feelings towards particular plants. The text was not completed by Wilson. The nomenclature he used or proposed has been superseded by more recent work, and many of his observations on hardiness or size should be made again after these fifty years.

Wilson frequently submitted articles



This classic outdoors picture taken in August 1916 by an unknown photographer includes (l to r) Alfred Rehder, E. H. Wilson, Charles Sargent, C. E. Faxon (artist who did the plates for Sargent's Silva, including several Magnolia drawings), and Camillo Schneider (who contributed many treatments for Plantae Wilsonianae, including his specialty, (Salix)). Dr. Richard Howard, director emeritus of Arnold Arboretum, in supplying this photograph says that to his knowledge it has never been published.

to horticultural magazines before incorporating the same material in revised form in chapters in his various books. His only major article on Magnolias known to me is "Notes on the Chinese Magnolias" published in the *Gardeners' Chronicle* 3rd. ser. 39: 234. 1906. His comments on Magnolias are not extensive in such books as "China - Mother of Gardens" or "Aristocrats of the Trees." Wilson's comments given here were not known at the time of publication of the three most significant recent studies of Magnolias: G. H. Johnstone, "Asiatic Magnolias in Cultivation" (1955); S. A. Spongberg, "Magnoliaceae Hardy in Temperate North America" (*Jour. Arnold Arb.* 57 (3): 250-312. 1976); and N.G. Treseder, "Magnolias" (1978). Future work on *Magnolia* will profit from a consideration of Wilson's observations.

There is no indication by reference to plates or figures that Wilson intended to illustrate this book. However, his photographs of China and Japan did include photographs of the species he commended to us. Illustrations of many of the species Wilson mentioned are to be found in the works cited above or in F. Julian Williams's article, "The Garden at Caerhays" (*Jour. Roy. Hort. Soc.* 91: 279-286. 1966).

Wilson's system of numbering requires special comment. He made two trips to China for Veitch and Sons Nursery. The seeds he sent back on each trip are numbered consecutively in one series. He also collected herbarium specimens in flower or fruit, which were numbered consecutively in a separate and often indistinguishable series. Thus Wilson collections should be cited as Wilson #000 (Veitch seed) or Wilson #000 (Veitch specimen).

Subsequently Wilson conducted two

more expeditions to China for the Arnold Arboretum. He began a new number series for this employer in which he used the same number for seed and herbarium specimens. These can be cited simply as Wilson #000 (A), although the parenthetical designation AA and Arn. Arb. have also been used. In some cases a Wilson number collected for the Arnold Arboretum may represent only a seed lot with no supporting voucher specimens; however, in most cases a Wilson number is represented by an herbarium specimen but not necessarily a seed lot.

Wilson's methods of operation in the field differed from those employed by most modern collectors. He would assemble his collections after several weeks of field work, include specimens gathered by his native collectors who had returned to base, sort the specimens as to genus or family, and then number serially at one time all specimens of *Magnolia* on hand before turning to another genus, such as *Euonymus*, and numbering those. Thus consecutive numbers in Wilson's series may be from widely distant and ecologically different geographic areas. Further, Wilson used the same number for what he believed to be the same plant collected in sterile condition, in flower, or in fruit at different months or even different years. He also sent his collectors back to an area to collect fruits or seeds from trees previously seen and occasionally marked. This assemblage of material by Wilson has led to mistakes in the mixing of seed in *Magnolia* or in the incorrect association of flowering and fruiting specimens, more often in other genera. Many of Wilson's numbered specimens have been given a suffix "a," "b," "c," etc., or are cited "in part."

The editorial comments which follow Wilson's descriptive notes are indexed in his text by suffixed numbers.