

# Boston's Uncommon Garden

It's lilac time  
at the  
Arnold Arboretum

by John Sedgwick



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In May, the lilacs bloom at Boston's Arnold Arboretum, and they are a heavenly sight. White, blue, pink, purple and every shade in between, the luscious blossoms toss among deep green leaves, bulging with color and brimming with scent.

A walk through the arboretum's lilacs starts with a creamy-white Japanese tree lilac that dates back to 1876 and the 'Miss Ellen Willmott,' a double-flowered white French hybrid. Six hundred kinds of lilac later, the stroll concludes with the reddish-purple 'Charles Joly' and a pearly-white Chinese tree lilac. This lilac grove, 1½ acres in size, is the second largest in the United States (after one in Rochester, New York). Twenty thousand people come here on Lilac Sun-

day (this year, May 22) to view them—and be transported by the sight and smell.

Glorious as they are, the lilacs are but one of many collections of woody (as opposed to herbaceous) plants on view across the meadows and hills of the Arnold Arboretum. Wonderfully extensive and artfully arranged, it is a 265-acre living storehouse of 7,000 kinds of trees, shrubs and vines—possibly the nation's most renowned botanical collection.

Started by Harvard University in 1872 in the Jamaica Plain section of Boston, the arboretum is the oldest university collection in the country that is open to the public. Its rolling hills form the most resplendent jewel in Boston's "Emerald Necklace," the green swath of parks designed

by Frederick Law Olmsted that runs from the Boston Common through the Fenway and out to Franklin Park.

The Arnold Arboretum lies near Franklin Park, on the site of a large farm that was donated to Harvard by Benjamin Bussey. (Some of Bussey's original lilacs, pines and oaks still stand.) "Arnold" comes from James Arnold, a wealthy lawyer who willed Harvard some \$100,000 to develop a botanical collection. But the plantings take their character from Charles Sprague Sargent, the arboretum's first director and a Harvard professor of horticulture.

At first glance, Sargent might have seemed an unlikely candidate for the job; as an undergraduate at Harvard, he graduated 88th in a class of 90. But he developed an in-

**Parallel paths curve past the arboretum's celebrated lilacs.**

terest in horticulture while managing Holm Lea, his 130-acre ancestral estate in neighboring Brookline. As arboretum director, he worked closely with Olmsted, then busy with his plans for Boston's parks. The two laid out paths and roads to follow the natural contours of the land and allow for arresting views.

Sargent's intent was to collect and display every tree and shrub he could find to survive in Boston's climate. To this end, he toured Japan in 1892 and circumnavigated the globe in 1903. Where he couldn't go himself, he sent others. (One such envoy, E. H. Wilson, had one of his legs crushed by a landslide as he reached for an exotic lily bulb in China.)

Since Sargent's death in 1927, the arboretum has continued this tradition, importing some 2,000 specimens to plant here or to pass along to collections elsewhere in the country. From Chinese seeds, the arboretum sprouted a *Metasequoia* tree, the dawn redwood that, according to fossil records, first grew 200 million years ago and was thought extinct until 1947. In 1980 a rare Chinese shrub, *Heptacodium jasminoides*, was brought here, becoming the first of its kind in the United States. Today the arboretum harbors the largest collection of Asian trees outside Asia, either living on its grounds or preserved in its herbaria.

The map of the arboretum looks oddly like a map of the United States, with the main entrance in the upper right-hand corner, near the state of Maine. The summit of Bussey Hill, 180 feet high, affords good views of the region that might be Appalachia; past Bussey Street, near what would be the western Rockies, 237-foot Peters Hill allows an even finer panorama: the skyline of Boston rising up beyond the crab apple trees to the southeast. Bussey Brook cuts through the arboretum from top to bottom, much like the Mississippi does, and the lilacs occupy Tennessee and Kentucky.

Yet, like the United States itself, the landscape here is so extraordinarily varied that you need only turn a corner to encounter entirely new terrain. Bussey Brook evokes the mountains of Colorado in the way it trickles down through a meadow of wildflowers, and the crab apples and cherry trees on Peters Hill conjure up a Concord orchard. The 30-foot redwood brings California to mind; dogwoods sprinkled throughout the grounds suggest a Japanese garden. ▶▶

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## ARNOLD ARBORETUM (Continued)

With so much to see, it's a good idea to enter by the main gate and head straight for the Hunnewell Visitor Center. There you can equip yourself with a map and pamphlets to plan your tour. A list by the front door tells which trees and shrubs are in bloom that month. The arboretum tries to have something flowering year-round. A late-blooming witch hazel, for example, has been known to reveal its spidery yellow blossoms here well into January and February.

But the spring months—and especially May—are probably the best time to come. The show begins in early April, as blossoms start to explode with the rapidity and oomph of a fireworks display's grand finale. First come the forsythias, followed by honeysuckle, magnolias, cherry trees, azaleas, crab apples, dogwood, horse chestnuts, rhododendrons, wisteria and so on, until the final thunderclap when the roses and hydrangeas bloom in late June.

As you venture into the garden you can

still see Olmsted's original curving roadways. In 1986 a new path was built, and named the Sargent Trail after the arboretum's first director. The trail lets visitors leave the main thoroughfares, which can be congested on peak-season weekends, and slip deeper into the woods.

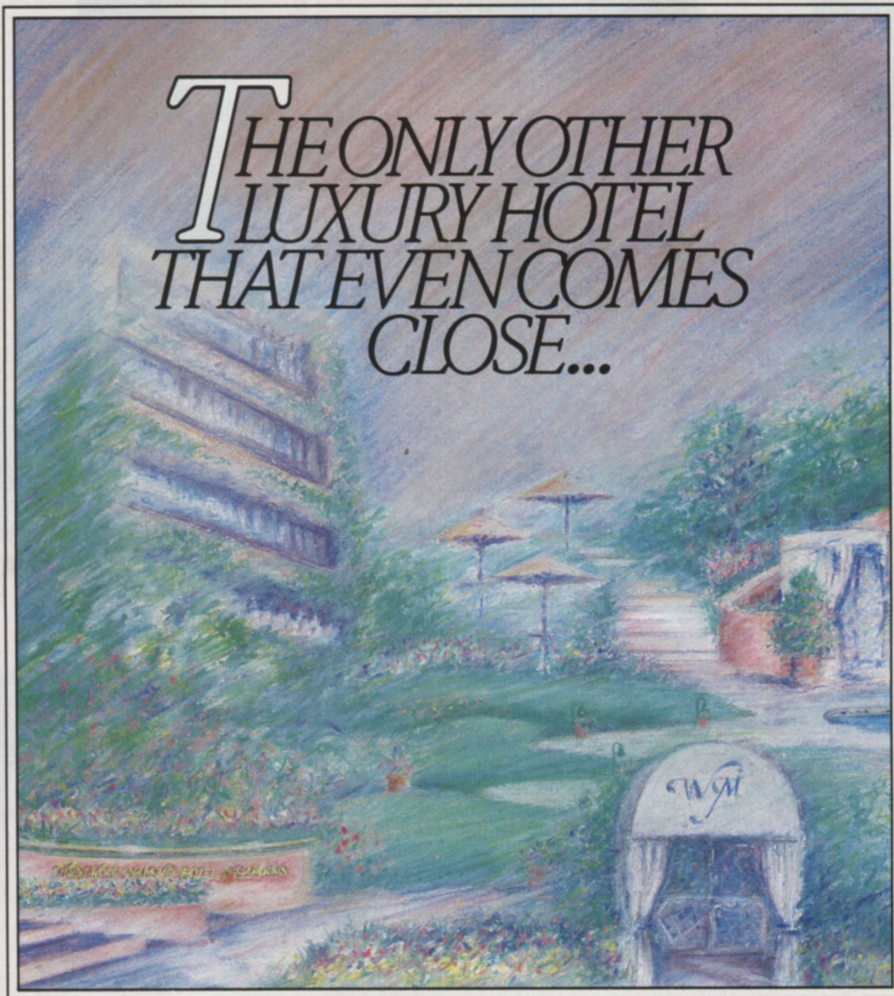
The trees are grouped by family—pine, beech, walnut, elm and so on. The collection of maples near the visitor center is particularly impressive, as it gathers 130 different kinds of maple. These range from the familiar American red maple to the columnar maple (so called because its limbs shoot almost straight into the air) and the paperbark maple, whose sinuous trunk exfoliates its bark as if it were sunburned skin.

The elms, sadly, have lost their American cousins to Dutch elm disease, but the others—Siberian elm and Chinese elm—are carrying grandly on. The birch collection stands beside the elms, their white bark particularly ghostly when surrounded by so much color. Then there are the sweetgums, walnuts, boxwoods, wingnuts and Japanese hemlocks.

At the Bonsai House, a slat-roofed, pagodalike building located about where Chicago would be on our map, you'll find miniature versions of the trees out front—hemlock, beech, maple—some of them up to 250 years old. It might come as a relief, finally, to find something of manageable size.

The tree lovers who laid out the gardens couldn't bear to act only in the interest of science. Here and there they have set a tree or plant for no other reason than that it looks so beautiful in that spot. Thus, across from the lilac grove, the white flowers of a dogwood are set off against a redbud, a small tree whose slender limbs are covered in spring with fine purple-red blossoms. Before them, pagoda trees lift their branches to the sky; behind them dark conifers sway heavily in the wind. Such dramas, such visions, await you in nearly every corner of this magnificent place. ◀◀

*The Arnold Arboretum of Harvard University is on Route 203, off Route 1, in Jamaica Plain, Massachusetts. To get there by subway, take the Orange Line to the Forest Hills station; the entrance gate is about two blocks west. The arboretum is open from sunrise to sunset every day of the year. Admission is free. Guided tours are available; call 617-524-1717 for more information.*



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