



Fall color on the new specimen of *Rhododendron mekongense* var. *mekongense* in front of the Stone Cottage.

New Plantings in the Arboretum

THE YEAR IN REVIEW

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Each year, I like to highlight some of the many new plantings around the Arboretum—not only as a record of how the collections and gardens expand and develop, but also as a way to highlight some of the interesting plants visitors can seek out on future visits.

This past year focused on smaller projects and further expansions of core collections, many through generous donations from gardens, plant collectors and individuals.

West of the Graham Visitors Center

A prominent new display over the past year has been the renovated and expanded plantings just to the west of the Graham Visitors Center, at one of the busiest entry points for visitors to the Arboretum. A generous donation from Arboretum Foundation Unit 26 has allowed us to plant this area with a great variety of

trees, shrubs and perennials. In 2023, we added trees and larger shrubs (see my review in last winter’s “Bulletin”); in early 2024, we completed the planting with the addition of many smaller shrubs, perennials and ferns.

The bed was envisioned as a preview of some of the types of collections that can be found in the greater Arboretum and also as a display with four-season interest. This past year, we planted several species and varieties of smaller-stature rhododendrons for evergreen structure, interesting leaves and colorful blooms. In two sweeps, we added the always underutilized *Rhododendron degronianum* var. *yakushmanum*, which is a widely adaptable, compact grower getting up to three feet tall and bearing rounded, felted evergreen leaves. The top surface of new foliage is covered in fuzzy, gray tomentum (hairs), while bronze indumentum (hairs/scales) is prominent

on the undersides. In early to mid-spring, white blooms open from pink buds. (I would grow this plant for the leaves alone, but the attractive flowers and easy-care nature of this species all combine to make it indispensable.)

At the northwest side of the bed, we planted three examples of the dwarf selection *Rhododendron* ‘Peter Bee’. Developed by local hybridizer Warren Berg, it reaches only 18 inches tall at maturity and produces small, glossy leaves and an abundance of bright-yellow flowers. It blooms in mid-spring and is sure to brighten this lightly shaded display.



Deer ferns (*Blechnum spicant*) in the new bed across from the Visitors Center.

For winter interest, we added five different hellebore cultivars in massed plantings around the trees and shrubs. We are trialing some of the more recent complex hellebore (*Helleborus*) hybrids, which promise more durable foliage along with profuse blooms. Cultivars include the light pink *Helleborus* × *lempertii* ‘COSEH 5600’ (HCG® Winter Ballet Liara) and purplish-streaked yellow *H. × glandorffensis* ‘HG 1428’ (HGC® Ice N’ Roses® Purple Sunrise). They bloom from late December to early March and brighten the ground plane during our darker months.

Another goal for this bed was to expand our fern collections and complement the nearby Hardy Fern Foundation display adjacent to the Graham Visitors Center. Ferns in the new bed were chosen for their texture and distinct growth habits. An older bed, just west of the new one,

has a nice display of our native *Polystichum munitum* (western sword fern), and we continued the native theme with a planting of two dozen *Blechnum spicant* (deer fern) where the two beds meet. Deer fern has long been one of my favorites: Its distinct sterile and fertile fronds provide lovely structure on a smaller species.

Two sweeps of *Dryopteris erythrosora* ‘Brilliance’ (autumn fern)—comprising more than 25 specimens each—were added at the northwest and eastern sections of the bed. This cultivar features bronzy-red new growth, which fades to a medium green as the fronds age. It is one of the best ferns for bright woodland conditions. At the southeast side of the bed, we planted a sweep of another evergreen species, *Polystichum makinoi* (Makinoi’s holly fern), which features shiny, olive-green foliage that reaches two feet tall and wide. On the south side, a large sweep of the two-foot-tall, semi-evergreen *Dryopteris* × *complexa* ‘Stableri’ (narrow-leaf, gold-scaled male fern) adds a crinkly texture and light-green color to the plantings. The Hardy Fern Foundation generously donated many of these plants.

Climbing the largest of the cedar snags in the bed is *Holboellia* aff. *angustifolia*. This evergreen vine in the plant family Lardizabalaceae was grown from seed collected by Dan Hinkley in Guizhou province, China. It features large, palmate (hand-shaped) evergreen leaves and large, lightly fragrant, whitish-cream flowers. The vine should adapt to the site’s drier conditions, once established, and grow vigorously up the trunk in time.

Stone Cottage

At the south end of the Arboretum, the landscape around the historic Stone Cottage was refreshed with new plantings and an accessible pathway. Construction of the Arboretum Loop Trail several years ago cut off the former gravel walkway to the front door of the building, which meant the only way to access the cottage from Arboretum Drive was to traverse a large area of lawn. The building, itself, has been renovated (including the addition of internet service and updated lighting) for future use as staff office

space—so the suitable, year-round and level path also was needed. As part of this work, we refreshed the landscaping, with new plantings on the west side of the cottage.

Anchoring the bed, a large, seven-foot-tall *Acer palmatum* ‘Beni-tsukasa’ was planted. This was one of several nice specimens of Japanese maple cultivars donated to the Arboretum by Carole Rush of Seattle. It is a selection from Japan that features bright, new leaves of peach, gold and red each spring. These fade to light green each summer before turning orange and red in autumn. Over time, the specimen will grow to 10 feet tall.

As companions, we planted several new rhododendrons, including two that were part of a larger donation of mature specimens from the Rhododendron Species Botanical Garden (RSBG) in Federal Way. The first is a new species for us, *Rhododendron mekongense* var. *mekongense*, native to a wide, disjunct range stretching from southwestern China to Nepal. Uncommon in cultivation, it is a deciduous species growing four to six feet tall and producing yellow to yellowish-green flowers, usually before the leaves emerge in spring.

The other donation is a large example of the always curious *Rhododendron stenopetalum* ‘Linearifolium’, an evergreen azalea with fine, long, hairy and narrow leaves that are very

un-rhododendron like. The flowers are also narrow, strap-like and bright pink and make a nice contrast with the apple-green foliage. This is a great plant for textural contrast in the garden and is now more widely available at plant sales and mail-order nurseries. It is always a fun plant to stump your gardening friends with. Slow-growing but dependable, it matures into a nice, three-foot-high specimen.



Rhododendron formosanum near the Woodland Garden bridge.

Woodland Garden Rhodies

While Rhododendron Glen has been a major focus of development the last couple of years, we are also bolstering our collection of this tremendously diverse genus throughout other suitable areas of the Arboretum. As mentioned, we had the good fortune of receiving a donation of ten mature specimens from our friends at RSBG, which came about when they needed to renovate some garden areas of their fine collection.

In the Woodland Garden we added a few more larger rhododendrons. The largest, at the east side of the main north-south path through the glade—by the *Lindera obtusiloba* (Japanese spice bush)—is *Rhododendron formosanum*. Native to Taiwan, this species has narrow, rounded leaves. The flowers are white with red spotting and appear in June to early July. Our specimen was growing in a lath house at RSBG for many years and is more than seven feet tall and wide.



Dark-cinnamon indumentum on the foliage of *Rhododendron elegantulum*.

Just across the trail to the southeast, we planted a large example of *Rhododendron elegantulum*. This is a wonderful foliage plant with a dense, dark-cinnamon indumentum on the underside of the leaves. In mid-spring, light-pink flowers with darker flushing open from medium-pink buds. The species has a limited distribution in the wild in the high elevations on the border of Sichuan and Yunnan provinces in China, and it is classified as vulnerable to extinction. Slow-growing to six feet tall, it is allied to the fine foliage species *R. bureavii* and worth seeking out.

In Rhododendron Glen, several other species were added as part of RSBG's donation. I've long sought to include another example of *Rhododendron quinquefolium* in the Arboretum. We only have one other specimen in the larger collection, growing in the Japanese Garden. A deciduous species of elegant habit and attractive leaves and flowers, it is native to Japan. It is a very slow grower, and I'm sure that is the reason for its scarcity in nurseries. The specimen we received from RSBG had been growing in a lath house under irrigation for nearly 50 years, and it was a delight to receive such a large example for the Arboretum. Light-green leaves emerge in spring in whorls of five at the branch tips and are attractively edged in dark red. White, funnel-shaped flowers appear with the foliage in mid-spring. We added this specimen to a prominent location in the upper Glen, just below the grove of Wollemi pines.

Also in the upper Glen, along the trail leading to Arboretum Drive that's heavily planted with hydrangeas, we added two examples of *Rhododendron coriaceum*. This is a moderate- to large-growing species native to high elevations from northeast Burma to Tibet and classified as near-threatened in the wild. New foliage emerges with silver-white, fuzzy indumentum, and this is reason enough (in my opinion) to grow the species! The early-season flowers are large, funnel-bell-shaped, and white—usually with a reddish blotch. Our donated specimen was grown from wild-collected seed, and we are pleased to add this to our conservation collection.

Woodland Garden Japanese Maples

In the Woodland Garden, just northwest of the foot bridge over the stream at the north side of the small lawn, we added two small Japanese maples, *Acer palmatum* 'Fairy Hair' and *A. palmatum* 'Van den Akker'. 'Fairy Hair' is a very fine-textured maple, as you might surmise from the cultivar name. It features very narrow, thread-like, bright-green leaves during spring and summer. In fall, these turn fiery red. The selection is also incredibly compact and should reach no more than six feet tall over many years.



Fall color on *Acer palmatum* 'Beni-tsukasa' by the Stone Cottage.



Fall color on *Acer palmatum* 'Fairy Hair' in the Woodland Garden.

A bit farther west, we added *Acer palmatum* ‘Van den Akker’. This is a slow-growing, lace-leaf form with a weeping habit, and in time it should reach four to five feet tall with a slightly wider spread. New foliage is orange-red, fading to bronze as summer sets in. Fall color is a mix of orange and yellows. The specimen should nicely complement other weeping maple varieties in the near vicinity.

Conifers and Hollies

In late fall 2024, we received donations of two different cultivars of our native *Thuja plicata* (western red cedar). The first was *Thuja plicata* ‘Colvos’, a selection made from a batch of seedlings of a wild tree by Michael Lee of the former Colvos Creek Nursery on Vashon Island. This particular seedling had a much more compact habit than the straight species, only reaching 14 feet tall after 15 years. We received three examples of ‘Colvos’, and they were all planted along the Broadmoor fence, east of Arboretum Drive, across from the north side of the Cascadia Forest. They should soften the view of the fence and provide a nice informal screen.

The second donation was three good-sized examples of *Thuja plicata* ‘Sunshine’, a golden-leaved selection that is also more compact and slower growing than the typical species. ‘Sunshine’ promises to keep its color better than other variegated forms and not burn in full sun. We have planted one of the eight-foot-tall



Developing cones on an umbrella pine (*Sciadopitys verticillata*) in the Pinetum.

specimens on the southwest side of the Willcox Bridge in the Pinetum to help brighten up the slope. We will be planting the other two specimens at the Center for Urban Horticulture.

Two other large conifers planted this year are fine examples of *Sciadopitys verticillata* (Japanese umbrella pine). This is a distinctive-looking conifer from Japan, and our new pair join another specimen that was planted in 2017 on the slope between the Arboretum Loop Trail and the Japanese Garden. A slow-growing species, it produces distinctive, umbrella-like whorls of soft, five-inch-long needles in groups of 20 to 30. In time, it should reach 25 to 30 feet tall. Narrower in youth (like most of us), it will eventually broaden in age. The new trees—one measuring six feet tall and the other 12 feet—were both donated by local homeowners. With their new neighbor, they will eventually provide a nice softening of the Loop Trail retaining wall to the east.

The Ilex (Holly) Collection area has been greatly refreshed over the last year with increased bed definition, diligent weeding, mulching, and expanded space for new plantings. Two new additions to the collection are plants grown from seed collected in the wild. The first is a new species for us, and one that’s also relatively new to cultivation. *Ilex robusta*, a rare species from mid-elevation forests in the Guangxi province of China, has elliptic, smooth leaves and red fruits. Three large plants were shared with us by Far Reaches Farm and were planted in one of the beds showcasing species in the Asian/North American Ilex clade. While the species epithet



Thuja plicata ‘Sunshine’ under the Willcox Bridge.



Ilex robusta in fruit.

seems to refer to its substantive leaves, the ultimate size of the plant is unknown—though it will mostly likely be in the six to 10-foot-tall range in cultivation.

Joining *Ilex robusta* in the same bed are

three examples of *Ilex pedunculosa*, also grown from seed collected in the wild by Far Reaches. This is another *Ilex* species with untoothed leaves. It's commonly called the longstalk holly, and this name refers to the long peduncles (berry stalks) that hold the plant's one quarter inch red fruits. The species can reach 15 feet high and requires both male and female plants for berry set. Fortunately, we have at least one of each in close proximity.

South End of Arboretum

In late 2023, we received a large specimen tree, *Acer japonicum* 'Aconitifolium' (fernleaf full moon maple) from the former City People's Nursery site in Madison Park. As I described in last winter's "Bulletin," this tree was planted by Big Trees, Inc. and our staff in an expanded bed near the Arboretum's south entry rock. Early in 2024, we added additional plantings to the bed. These included three of our wonderful native *Vaccinium ovatum* (evergreen huckleberry) and two selections of hellebores.

We added two masses of *Helleborus* × *glandor-fensis* 'COSEH 5000' [HGC® Ice N' Roses® Picotee] to the north and south edges. The north mass closer to the Loop Trail was interplanted with *H. × iburgensis* 'Epb21' [Frostkiss® Winger Angels™ Charmer]. Ice N' Roses® Picotee is a white-blooming hellebore with dark-pink picotee edges, while Winter Angels™ Charmer is a compact grower with abundant burgundy-spotted, deep-rose flowers. Both have substantial dark-green foliage with subtle, gray overtones.

Continuing north and west along East Lake Washington Boulevard, across from the entrance drive to the Japanese Garden parking lot, we planted a large *Acer palmatum* 'Shishigashira'

(lion's head maple) this past fall. It was a donation from the Molbak's Nursery site in Woodinville and was also planted with significant assistance from Big Trees. Already 12 feet tall and eight feet wide, it is an impressive addition to the landscape. The lion's head maple is a dense, upright-growing variety of the Japanese maple with unique texture. The two-inch-long leaves are deep green and somewhat crinkled in appearance; palmate, with five to seven lobes each; and densely arranged around the stems. Fall color is perhaps the latest arriving of all Japanese maple cultivars and consists of shades of gold and crimson. The new tree is paired with another specimen of 'Shishigashira', just to the south, and creates a pleasing entry sequence for the Japanese Garden lot. We are pleased to help honor the legacy of Molbak's Nursery and its support of the Arboretum and the local gardening community over almost 70 years.

These are just some of the many additions to the Arboretum in the past year. We continu-



Planting the *Acer palmatum* 'Shishigashira' donated by Molbaks.

ally source and receive new seeds and plants throughout the year, many of them requiring years of care before they are of suitable size to plant out into the gardens and collections. We rely on the support of donors, friends, fellow public gardens, institutions and collectors to grow and enhance our collections.

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