In the fall of 2020, Jennifer Ott from HistoryLink.org interviewed plant explorer Dan Hinkley as part of the UW Botanic Gardens’ ongoing Oral History Project. Following is an edited excerpt.

In the opening section of the interview, Dan talks about coming from the Midwest in the early 1980s to do a Master of Science in horticulture at the University of Washington’s nascent Center for Urban Horticulture. Under the tutelage of Dr. John Wott, Dan spent two years studying the plants at Washington Park Arboretum, sorting out the taxonomy of its extensive maple collection. Dan describes this interfacing with the Arboretum as a “life-changing experience.”
JO: Can you talk a little more about interfacing with the Arboretum? How would you describe what the place has given to you?

DH: Well, every plant was new for me, and so it was like walking through the Louvre. I’d find the labels and go home to look the plant up in my first set of W. J. Bean’s “Trees & Shrubs Hardy in the British Isles.” Then I would realize, “Oh my gosh, there are more species of Eucryphia that I’d never heard of!” And I’d go back out in the Arboretum, and I’d find those. And that would lead me to another Chilean plant or another New Zealand plant or to one from China. So, one stone at a time, I developed this formidable encyclopedia of plant names; they just became adhered to my gray matter.

And when I went traveling, I’d recognize plants in the wild, and my comrades would be really impressed. They’d say, “Wow, you’re really smart.” But, really, all I knew was that this name went with that plant. Anybody can learn that. So, the Arboretum gave me this fortress of knowledge that I hadn’t really gone out to seek, but had acquired just being surrounded by it.

JO: I’ve seen the Arboretum’s accession index cards, which are the sort of the life history of each plant in the collection. Did you ever use them?

DH: Oh, I just loved those cards, and yes, I used them while working with the maples. Thinking back, I always wish I’d spent more time flipping through them because [Director] Brian Mulligan and [Plant Curator] Joe Witt would write little notes: “Hey, this plant is blooming on this date,” or “This plant’s looking good on this date,” or “This plant has died this year.” It’s like reading somebody’s journals over the years, and it influenced me enough to where, when I founded Heronswood Nursery and Garden in 1987 and started building its database of plants, I did exactly the same thing—and still do. If a plant’s looking good at any one time, say, I go to the database and make a note of it. And there’s not a time when I do it that I don’t think of those little scribbles that Brian and Joe wrote on those cards.

JO: Those cards are remarkable. They’re digitized now and available to everyone [see https://depts.washington.edu/uwbg/gardens/AccessionCards]. I’ve used them in my own research on Olmsted Parks. I’m not an expert on the actual plants, but I like to look at the cards to understand how plant people think.

DH: They really are charming. I’m so glad they’re digitized.

JO: I just learned that you got to live in the Stone Cottage at the south end of the Arboretum.

DH: Yes, I did.

JO: How did that come about?

DH: A little personal anecdote here: I moved to Seattle in the midst of a failing relationship and lived only one school term in that relationship before it fell apart. In January 1984, I had to move out of the house that we had rented together and needed a place. As it happened, the gentleman who lived in the cottage and took care of the Arboretum gates was retiring. It sounded ideal to me, so I took the job. I moved in with my dog, Emerson, and I actually raised up a baby crow while I lived there.

I even had the Stone Cottage painted by the landscape painter William Elston. Emerson is depicted out front, and the crow is sitting on one of the stone posts outside. I’m going to give that painting to the Arboretum before I kick the can, so Emerson and the crow will live on in perpetuity.
It was an incredibly noisy, horribly dusty place to live. That was the downside of it. The upside was the Arboretum was my backyard. I had it right at my avail every morning, afternoon and evening, and that’s how I really got to know it. On full-moon nights, Emerson and I would go for walks. One night, I encountered a tree silhouetted against the moonlight with the most beautiful leaves I’d ever seen. I just fell in love with it without knowing what it was. Next morning, I went back, found it, and learned its name, *Tetracentron sinense*. [See “*Tetracentron sinense*,” “Arboretum Bulletin, Spring 2019.”] I since had a lamp made and ornamented in copper with the leaves and stems of *Tetracentron*. It’s in our library at home, and when the leaves are back lit, it reminds me so much of that evening with my dog.

As for the cottage, I had people knock on my door every hour of the day and night thinking it was the restroom. I’d hear people screaming and would call the police thinking someone was being attacked. In the morning, I had to open the gates, and in the evening I had to be there to close the gates—every single day, seven days a week. So, when we talk about a herd of cows that need milking, it was like that.

**JO:** Where were the gates?

**DH:** At both ends of Arboretum Drive. The south end is blocked off now, but in those days, the drive was used as a minor arterial. Especially when traffic was backed up on Lake Washington Boulevard, people would cut through the Arboretum going way too fast, thinking they were being really smart. On occasion, I would close the north gate—I had to close one of them first, right?—and the cars would go whipping up, turn around, come back, and then find me closing the south gate. Oh my God, I got cussed out so many times.

**JO:** That sounds brutal—to be the public face of order in the park.

**DH:** It was. And it made me even more determined to screw them so they wouldn’t use the Arboretum as an arterial. It was wild.

**JO:** Let’s talk about when you would go on plant collecting expeditions. I know you did those quite often for many years and you still do. Correct?

**DH:** I still do.

**JO:** And did any of those plants get added to the collections at the Center for Urban Horticulture, or just at the Arboretum?

**DH:** That was always up to the University. I just give them the plants or seeds carte blanche. And nowadays, I no longer just give them little plants. Since 2007 at least, I’ve had a relationship with Monrovia growers, and they give me the surplus of everything they grow from the seed.
that I give them. So, I get these gigantic plants back that I have no room to put anywhere. And I just give them to the Arboretum. They’ve had a lot of truckloads of good-size plants for the last 13 years or so.

**JO:** That’s great. Wow. And did you ever consult with the Arboretum before going on a trip to see if there was any specific plant they were interested in getting?

**DH:** They gave me money for one trip, specifically, but they didn’t ask for anything that I can recall. They were very generous—one of the Arboretum Foundation Units provided the funds. That was in 2006, and I spent six weeks in Vietnam. I gave them all of the seeds from that trip. But I don’t remember them ever asking for anything from my trips. I gave them anything they wanted, had room for, or that made sense to have in the Arboretum collection.

**JO:** And do any of them stand out in your memory? Any particular plants that you’ve kept track of or were particularly glad that you gave them to the Arboretum?

**DH:** That list is pretty big now, and I’m always thrilled to go back and look at a plant that has my collection initials on it. I can’t grow all the trees that I’ve collected. I don’t have the room for it at Heronswood or at [my home garden of] Windcliff. So, for somebody else to see that intrinsic value in a tree and plant it and take care of it, it’s thrilling for me. I’m certain an *Aesculus wangii* from that trip is still growing. It’s a very rare species of horse chestnut. They have that in the collection from that trip.

**JO:** What was your involvement with Portico and the development of the plan for the Pacific Connections Garden at the Arboretum?

**DH:** That was so much fun! It was after I had left teaching at Edmonds Community College and went to Heronswood full-time, around 1995. I started doing consulting and was brought in on the team along with Scot Medbury. We competed for it by doing a presentation in front of the entire Arboretum management team, as well as City officials. Evidently, we did a strong presentation and were chosen. Then we got to go in and really get into the nitty-gritty details of it, and present those ideas to the public. We brought in focus groups from the neighborhood, some of whom were all really riled up that we were going to change their dog-walking patterns. But it wasn’t going to be their backyard park anymore—just for their own recreation.

I remember many team meetings, and it was...
just four of us: Kate Day, Dennis Meyer, Scot and myself. We got into these ideas and started ripping things apart in our minds, and then putting them back together and coming up with the different pods of the Pacific Connections Garden. It’s really exciting to see that these ideas we threw out were captured and then became something. It’s also really weird, because now I walk through the Garden, and I don’t even think of my involvement in it.

JO: That’s really interesting. Do you think that’s because it’s now hitting its stride with, particularly, the New Zealand Forest. It’s more established, and so it feels more like it has a life of its own?

DH: That might be why, certainly. I may have been involved in the planting design a little bit. Sarah Reichard was at the helm at that point in time, when the garden went in. I remember looking at the species mix that was proposed and feeling uneasy, thinking that not a lot of the plants would prove to be ultimately hardy. And being the Lutheran that I am from the Midwest, I hate seeing money spent foolishly. But in many ways, I was completely proven wrong. There were some losses, but the overall effect is really, really beautiful.

JO: You did your thesis on the maples of the Arboretum and focused on the actual ones planted there. What drew you to the maples? Was it the Asian maples that you were primarily interested in or was it all of them?

DH: Well, my focus ultimately went towards the Asian maples, but I don’t think it was my idea. I actually think that Joe Witt wanted to get that collection sorted out and suggested that as my study or at least a study. Shortly after, we lost Joe, and so I went forward with that. I’m so glad I did because it led me down a great road.

JO: Because the process of diving into the collection and sorting, organizing, and getting it squared up led to a lifelong interest, right?

DH: Yes, I’ve continued down the road of maples. In the process of searching for the maples in the Arboretum, my eyes started seeing maples. And so by default, I started seeing maples in the wild when other people didn’t, and I would point maples out, and they’d say, “That’s not a maple; don’t be ridiculous.” I’d say, “No, I just know it’s a maple,” and it would always turn out to be a maple.

Essentially, I had to do archaeology work to find the Arboretum maples. The notes on the index cards would say, “four feet south and 10
feet west” or whatever. But often the trees were covered with Himalayan blackberries or had other plants growing on top of them, or they were dead or in really bad condition. And as I mentioned, I would find other plants that weren’t maples and look at the labels. And then I was, like, “Wow, I learned 10 new plants today!”

**JO:** At the ceremony last year for the dedication of the Asian Maple Collection in your honor, were there any attendees at the ceremony who were particularly meaningful for you?

**DH:** My husband, Robert Jones, of course, because he’s been with me every step of the way. And, to have Val Easton there…she sort of led things. Fred Hoyt…Leslie Chihuly…I was really, I was just so tickled down deep and appreciative of that honor. It’s all sort of a blur now because I was probably just like this blubbery mess during the whole thing.

**JO:** Beyond the story that you told me about the *Tetracentron* tree, are there particular places or events that really jump out as important or special to you?

**DH:** I can remember going down to Azalea Way in the springtime when *Quercus robur* ‘Concordia’—that’s the golden English oak—was leafing out in the spring time. My God, it was so bright and just so stunning. And I just fell in love with that tree. [See “Golden Oak: An Arboretum Sentinel,” “Arboretum Bulletin,” Summer 2021.] And then there’s a grove of Chinese red birch, *Betula albosinensis var. septentrionalis.* I still go back to them. They’re just the most beautiful birch ever. They are more on the southern end of Azalea Way, just north of the new summer garden.

**JO:** Near the marshy area?

**DH:** Yes. They like it wet. Just so beautiful. And I can still remember early spring days walking down Azalea Way and smelling that wonderful sweetness of the cottonwoods. The cottonwoods are native down in that wet area. That’s where they want to grow. But there was that, just that wonderful sweetness on that first warm day of spring that we wait all winter long for. Boy, every time I smell it now, it transports me right to Azalea Way.

**JO:** Azalea Way is so much at the core of the park. It’s not just the trail that’s amazing. It brings in those other parts of the Arboretum because you’re close to everything as you walk along there.

**DH:** Yes, exactly. It sutures the two parts together.

**JO:** Why do you think the Arboretum is important to the community?

**DH:** How many layers can we go on with that question? For one, historically, it’s part of our city’s great chain of Olmsted parks. It’s remarkable that we still have that intact when you think about all the opportunities there have been to just axe it over the years. Also, the fact that we have that initial layout of the Olmsted Brother’s vision of the park. Even though their taxonomic plan didn’t entirely work—because some of it didn’t fit the land and site conditions—it was a wonderful way of approaching a botanic garden at that point in time.

And then, just the open space itself—to have that 230 acres in the middle of the city, and for it to mean so much more now than just a hallmark of how bad the traffic is: “Traffic’s backed up to the
Arboretum!” The perception of the Arboretum has changed so dramatically in the last 20 years. People see it as that wonderful, vibrant green space that the city needs in order to be livable.

I don’t think that I sensed that much when I was living there as a student. There were great plants there, but there was no real sense of intrinsic worth to the city.

JO: How about the Arboretum itself? Do you feel like the general public benefits directly from the idea of having an arboretum collection within the city?

DH: Well, I think that’s the learning curve we’re still up against: teaching people the provenance of a plant—where it comes from—and trying to excite their imaginations that this maple, say, comes from the Sichuan Province and exists somewhere else in its raw form. And here it is growing in Seattle. That notion just seems to go over people’s heads.

I’m up against that all the time here at Heronswood, where I’m excitingly telling folks that this plant is from Southern Chile. They’re, well, “That’s where you bought it?” It’s just such a hard message to get through, but once people get it, then the world comes alive. And I think that the more people who do get it, the more the message is going to be passed on in ways that people can grasp. When people like me talk about plants, we often do so in ways that can intimidate the beginner. But if you have a young 10-year-old excitedly talking about a tree that grows in Australia with the kangaroos, then that’s where the seed gets planted and the excitement carries forward.

JO: Do you feel like that center area of Pacific Connections—where you get a taste of each of the forest gardens—is an important part of that educational process?

DH: Yes, that was a smart move. It had to have been my idea!! What I hope, too, is that the interpretive shelter brings a human interaction with the cultural aspects of the plants and the native habitats into the conversation—that it helps people realize that humans are part of an ecosystem and that we’re not above it.

JO: I think it does an excellent job of that. So looking ahead, 20, 50 years, what do you hope will happen in the Arboretum?

DH: I guess I hope for a continually evolving garden. That’s a dicey thing to say because we all get attached to our trees, such as me and that Tetracentron, which I want to continue to be there.

But over the years, we’ve gotten attached to that bigleaf maple that’s also there, and that Douglas fir, and then all of a sudden we don’t have an Arboretum. We have a park. And so I want to think that the Arboretum’s going to go forward with the idea that the plantings—in order to be effective and truly educational—have to be relatively ephemeral, that there has to be change. And that doesn’t mean that everything has to come out, or that we can’t have reverence for those big, giant sequoias in the Sequoia Grove.

However, to really understand the plant kingdom and help conserve it, we have to continually examine the collection and ask what is most worthy of being illustrated or studied at this point in time. And we have to make those really hard decisions about whether the life expectancy of a particular tree has exceeded our expectations and whether it’s time to move on to something else.

So yes, my hope is that we have a living, breathing, dying, rejuvenating collection going forward.

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