

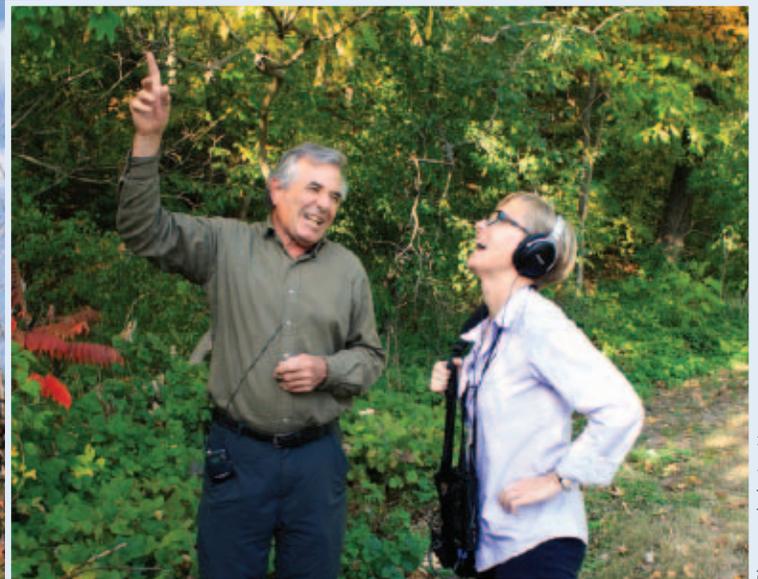
# SOUNDS OF AN EVOLVING LANDSCAPE

A Virtual Installation Illuminates Bussey Brook Meadow

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**Above left**, the John Blackwell Footpath transverses the Bussey Brook Meadow from Forest Hills to the South Street Gate of the Arboretum. The tract is preserved and minimally managed as a long-term study site for monitoring urban ecology. **Right**, Senior Scientist Emeritus Peter Del Tredici discusses the native and exotic species that grow spontaneously in Bussey Brook Meadow with Teri Rueb, recording remarks last autumn as part of a mobile "sound sculpture" designed to interpret this urban wild for Arboretum visitors.



Photographs by Jon Hetman

**I**nspiration, like beauty, often appears quietly and unexpectedly in the least likely of places. As an artist interested in interpreting landscapes, I usually respond first to a place, its inhabitants, and the various activities and environmental processes that enliven it. These become the primary source material for audio collages that enhance the visitor experience of outdoor spaces. In the case of my current project to create a "sound walk" for Bussey Brook Meadow at the Arnold Arboretum, however, my inspiration began with a person: Peter Del Tredici, Senior Scientist Emeritus at the Arnold Arboretum and Associate Professor at the Harvard Graduate School of Design (GSD).

Peter and I first met in 2007 when I was working on my doctorate at the GSD. At the time I was working with the Boston Institute of Contemporary Art to create "Core Sample," a GPS-based sound walk set on Spectacle Island in the Boston Harbor. A former landfill, the island is now a park covered with spontaneous vegetation from around the world and over 24,000 native plantings original to the park design. Wanting to learn more about the plant life of Spectacle Island, I approached Peter as an expert on the

botany of disturbed landscapes and as an educator who uses the island as a teaching ground for his graduate classes. Our first interview began a conversation that has flourished over several years, ultimately leading to our collaboration on this project at the Arboretum.

The diverse cultural history of Bussey Brook Meadow has yielded an extraordinary urban wild nested in the heart of Boston. Bursting with feral and opportunistic species that hail from around the world, this once neglected urban parcel now stands as an emblem of biological regeneration in the wake of over 300 years of ecological disturbance. The 24-acre lot passed through the hands of various owners for centuries until 1996 when Harvard University and the City of Boston agreed to make it part of the Arnold Arboretum. Now committed to its preservation for long-term ecological research, the Arboretum maintains the parcel with little interference so spontaneous and opportunistic species can follow their natural evolutionary course.

A dynamic setting of human interaction and impact, the meadow continues to welcome the public while the processes of an emergent ecology continue undisturbed. With a history that has included interventions from agriculture to habitation, the site and its Blackwell Footpath serve visitors today as a pedestrian transit corridor and urban refuge for dog walkers, bird watchers, and strollers. Sometimes it's even

an outdoor playground and classroom for students, many of whom come to the Arboretum to learn about the biology of plants and the ecology of urban environments.

Entitled "Other Order," the sound walk for Bussey Brook Meadow is scheduled to launch in summer 2014 with a free application available for download from the Arboretum website and online retailers. Visitors to the meadow may download the mobile app and hear recordings of natural sounds and spoken words activated by their movement through the landscape, determined by the global-positioning capabilities of their smart phones or other mobile devices. Conversations by scientists, Arboretum staff, and enthusiasts for this reclaimed green space evoke its historical and contemporary meanings, accompanied by found and composed sounds that capture how the meadow changes over time, through the seasons, and among those who use and enjoy it.

Peter, who initiated this project with me and who retired from the Arboretum in January after 35 years, emerges as the central voice in the walk as he interacts with various interviewees, students, and visitors who have joined him in the meadow over the past year and a half. Arboretum visitors using the sound walk will feel as if they are experiencing a stroll through the meadow with Peter and his companions, his animated voice and love of plants illuminating and celebrating this remarkable preserve for urban ecology. 

### **Renewing a Garden** *(continued from page 4)*

was referring to the shrub garden originally located where the Bradley Rosaceous Collection exists today, the concept and its advantages apply perfectly to today's Leventritt Garden, where more than 700 plants representing over 400 taxa from 55 plant families can be seen, smelled, touched, and examined in a small area. Many of these species would be difficult to grow elsewhere in the Arboretum due to their intolerance for shade, high maintenance or special soil requirements, or small stature.

The vine section of the Leventritt Garden is particularly unique in providing each specimen with its own metal frame for support and display. These free-standing trellises allow us to collect a wide variety of vines with diverse growth habits. The garden's planting and design scheme also suggests a number of educational themes for visitor enrichment, including Arnold Arboretum plant introductions, plants that love acidic soils, and taxa exhibiting seasonal interest.

The kinds of plants and their placement in the Leventritt Garden is intended to remain in flux, based on Founding Director Charles Sprague Sargent's goal for "a collection for investigation...arranged in a manner to permit admission of...new forms and the removal of others which have served

their purpose." The Leventritt Garden offers an ideal location for this approach to a perpetually-evolving collection, where small and delicate plants as well as new cultivars can be tested to evaluate their performance in a managed garden setting. Last summer, I worked with Michael Dosmann, the curator of living collections, to reevaluate all accessioned plants in the Leventritt Garden based on their condition, their value as individuals in the Arboretum collections, and the interpretive needs of the garden. Since last spring, more than 60 plants have been removed or transplanted to other locations, opening up space for dozens of new plants and giving highly valued accessions more room to thrive.

There is a constant supply of smaller, sun-loving plants under propagation by staff at the Dana Greenhouses, where all Arboretum plants begin their lives as subjects of both scientific and horticultural study. As new plants are collected in the wild or introduced as cultivars in the nursery trade, staff will continue to refine holdings in the Leventritt Garden to suit the goals of its creation and the aesthetics of its landscape. Keep visiting us regularly to see how this green and sunny spot continues to evolve in coming years. 