

Katsura Tree (*Cercidiphyllum japonicum*) – Narrated by Michael Dosmann

My name is Michael Dosmann. I am the Keeper of the Living Collections.

So in 2017, on a collecting trip with NACPEC—the North America-China Plant Exploration Consortium—to northern Sichuan, I was joined by my colleague Andrew Gapinski from the Arnold Arboretum and from *Harvard Magazine*, Jonathan Shaw, who is actually the Managing Editor. He was there to do a little bit of exploration with us, and to write an article about the exploration trip. And then from Beijing Botanic Garden we had Kang Wang and then Ms. Jian who is in the curatorial staff, so they joined us from Beijing Botanical Garden, and then Mr. Li, who is a graduate student at the Chengdu Institute of Biology, a person who knew the local flora, but also someone we could provide some training to on how to collect for seeds and germplasm.

So our whole group, we met in Chengdu and then we drove North out near Pingwu to a nature preserve, Xuebaoding Nature Preserve, and our goals were to collect a number of different plant species that were native to the area: a lot of maples, *Davidia* was on the list—the dove tree—a few hydrangeas, some interesting things that occur in northern Sichuan where they might have a little extra cold hardiness. And so those were our goals for that autumn 2017 trip.

Ernest Henry Wilson collected innumerable seeds, plants, cuttings of things that were introduced into cultivation; tens of thousands of herbarium vouchers that are useful for scientific study; and then photographs—photographs of landscape, photographs of people, and photographs of plants—and those have had amazing staying power, are beautiful look at, they're extremely well-composed, with great detail.

In 1910, late summer, he had photographed a katsura tree and it was a massive, massive katsura tree, multiple large trunks had been coppiced over and over again, had been cut back 10, 15 feet up every year, probably for fuel wood. And it was a beautiful, beautiful image, and that tree was one that he collected seed off of. He had seen katsura numerous times in China but had never seen any of them in fruit. So it was also important because he photographed the tree and he'd collected seed off of it, the first time he'd ever collected katsura seed in the wild, and he also described it as at the time a different variety of the normally known katsura.

So it was kind of a trifecta, a great photograph of a tree that he collected seed off of, that also ended up being a new taxon, or a new variety, of katsura, so I was really excited that we knew all of that about the tree and that the tree still existed. So wow—what an opportunity to go back and revisit the exact same Wilson tree.

So, that day, we launched ourselves from the ranger station to get to the katsura tree, we knew it was going to be a bit of a day-long adventure. Many of the roads were washed out because of that summer seismic activity and then subsequent rains. So they'd washed out these roads and had collapsed, and so we knew we had about a three- or four-hour hike to get to the katsura trees. Much of it was on roads, although as we were hiking up there, those roads were washed out, and so we were following some yak trails to get around them—the yaks are still using the roads even if the cars and the other people couldn't—and then eventually uphill through pretty leech-infested, wet, dank, damp soil/plant/rock mashup.

And so we hiked up through there, and thinking back to Wilson's photograph and in his writings in *China, Mother of Gardens*, he talked about the area being completely denuded, no forests at all, or heavily grazed by horses, by cows, by other livestock, and then cut down for fuel and timber, and then you saw that photo of the tree basically by itself. So that's what it was in my search image a little bit. Well we get to this and eventually, they say the tree's up there, uphill, and there's no way you could see a few feet in front of your face because of the slope, and then all the brush, in front of us.

So we finally bivouac our way through, and hack our way through, and we get to these trees, and we'd seen a number of katsura trees, large ones on our way, and then we see *this*, and it was a bit of a religious experience. The trees—they tripled, quadrupled in size. They were ancient, hollowed out. Again, there are these three or four main stems that had grown together and kept growing, and it was phenomenal. It was also a little bizarre because the trees had grown up, they're quite large at this time, 60, 70 feet, and yet all the other vegetation had too, so, it was very hard to get... you couldn't step back a hundred feet and get a picture of the entire tree because everything else was in front of you. But it was just... wow. It was a bit of a religious experience to stand 107 years later on the exact same spot where Wilson had stood and posed three of his collectors in front of a tree to photograph, and then we collected seed off of the tree just like he had later that season. So it was uncanny.