



The **ARNOLD**
ARBORETUM
of HARVARD UNIVERSITY

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Davidia involucrata

(Dove tree, handkerchief tree, ghost tree) Zones 5-7

Still rare in gardens, *Davidia* is unrivaled among hardy trees for historical, botanical, and horticultural distinction. It offers attractive, mottled, reddish-gray bark along with 3–5” leaves that are a bright green and typically pest- and disease-free. Large round fruits, approximately 1–1½” in diameter, dangle singly from a 3–4” pedicel and often persist into winter. Patience, however, is required to enjoy the dove tree’s most cherished horticultural trait—its remarkable flowers. It can take up to 10 years to begin blooming and may only flower abundantly every other year. Nevertheless, according to legendary Arboretum plant explorer Ernest Henry Wilson, the flowers are “the most interesting and beautiful of all trees of the north temperate flora.” Each flower head is a tight cluster of true flowers, subtended by a pair of large 4–7”, pure white bracts which serve the function of petals. Flowers hang in long rows beneath the branches and look their best in mid-to-late May. On a breezy day, the bracts flutter in the wind like white doves or pinched handkerchiefs, hence the English common names for this tree. Dove tree has a pyramidal growth habit and may grow 20–40’ tall. It prefers well-drained, moist soil and light shade but will tolerate full sun if the soil is kept moist.

The Arnold Arboretum’s most celebrated dove tree was collected in China by French missionary Père Farges in 1897 and arrived as a rooted layer via an arboretum of Maurice de Vilmorin in Les Barres, France. It stands today in the Arboretum’s Explorers Garden near a specimen grown from Wilson’s collecting expedition for England’s Veitch Nurseries in 1900.

Planting and Care Instructions

Carefully unpack your plant and choose a location that is partially shaded and protected from foot traffic and the potential for accidental breakage until you are ready to plant. Check it for watering needs daily, as containerized plants dry out quickly.

Plant in well-drained soil at the correct depth. The top of the root system should be level with the soil surface. The depth of the hole should accommodate the height of the roots and be left undisturbed to prevent settling, while the width of the hole should be at least two times the width of the root ball. This loosened soil will allow new roots to grow more quickly. After planting, water your shrub well and apply a 1-inch layer of mulch over the area, but do not allow mulch to contact the stem to reduce the likelihood of rot. Water again after mulching and continue to water (but not saturate) until established.