Belonging to the rose family (Rosaceae), crabapples (Malus spp.) are among the most ornamental small trees in the temperate zone. With their beautiful, abundant flowers in spring and colorful fruits in fall, crabapples symbolize everything good in Chinese painting, poetry, and the gardens arts. With so much to recommend them, it is not surprising that crabapples have become one of the most popular garden trees in the temperate world.

As a curator at the Beijing Botanical Garden, I oversee a collection of seventy-eight different kinds (taxa) of ornamental crabapples. Comprising both species and cultivated varieties of Malus, the collection has been studied closely as a project at the Garden for 24 years. The trees’ formal characteristics, cold hardiness, drought and flood tolerance, and resistance to pests and diseases have been investigated extensively. Through this research, we developed a system for evaluation, databased our documentation, and gathered molecular data to elucidate genetic relationships among the species and cultivars. However, with thousands of cultivars in Malus, creating a comprehensive database of the genus is no small task.

This year, Beijing Botanical Garden was selected as the International Cultivar Registration Authority for Malus, and I am serving as the official registrar. As such, I’m compiling a comprehensive checklist of known taxa to improve the cataloging database of their names and individual characteristics. Part of this work involves gathering more information on cultivars old and new, and so field work is required to observe and document these plants. I knew the first place I should visit in this task would be the Arnold Arboretum—thanks to E. H. Wilson and other pioneering plant explorers, the Arboretum’s living collections, library and archives, and herbaria resources on Malus are among the world’s best.

As noted hybridizer Father John Fiala once said, “No horticultural institution did as much for introducing and discovering new species, varieties, or special clones (of Malus) as did the Arnold Arboretum.” Plants were collected in the wild by Arboretum explorers like Wilson and Charles Sprague Sargent, were studied and hybridized by Arboretum scientists like Karl Sax, and promoted and popularized by Arboretum horticulturists like Donald Wyman. As a recipient of the Jewett Prize—an Arnold Arboretum award for research focused on the biology of flowers or fruits—I was able to work as a visiting scientist in its incomparable collection of crabapples, numbering some 450 plants and including over 100 cultivars. During my three months in the collections, I studied plants in the landscape as well as the vouchers in the cultivated herbarium, researched curatorial records, read many articles on Malus in the pages of Arnoldia, and studied the names and taxonomy of cultivars in the Arnold Arboretum library and archives.

In addition to compiling extensive written documentation, I also took many photos of Arboretum crabapples, and captured images of the flowering branches of over 100 taxa of crabapples by using a flatbed scanner. With these new data and documentation in hand, I and others at the Beijing Botanical Garden have a far better understanding of the genus and can put the information to good use in our own collection and in our service as registrar.

Many Chinese trees like dawn redwood (Metasequoia glyptostroboides), seven-son flower (Heptacodium miconioides), and paperbark maple (Acer griseum) became horticultural favorites through the Arboretum’s efforts. For me, this is especially true of the crabapples that transform Peters Hill each spring and fall. As I continue my journey around the world as the international registrar for crabapples, the Arboretum’s collection will continue to be an important source of information and inspiration for me.