Embedded Botanical Specimens

Larissa Glasser, Library Assistant

Visitors may encounter and observe a wide diversity of plants in the Arboretum landscape. However, to catch any one in full bloom, fruit, or even in leaf can be a matter of timing and luck. Botanical artwork, photography, and herbarium specimens can help by encapsulating a view of the peak, ephemeral moments in the life of a plant. The Horticultural Library of the Arnold Arboretum holds a collection of nearly 300 botanical specimens, all originating from Arboretum plants, embedded in blocks of polyester resin. Distinct from the dried and pressed plants preserved in the Arboretum Herbarium, embedded specimens offer a unique way to view the actual physical characteristics of plants, from Abelia grandiflora to Zenobia pulverulenta.

The collection was conceived by Gordon DeWolf, Jr., who as the Arboretum’s Horticultural Taxonomist in the 1970s saw embedding plants as a valuable tool for public education. He recruited the talents of longtime Arboretum docent Sheila Magullion, who experimented with a variety of embedding techniques to preserve the formal integrity of the specimens. Some experimentation was required for the successful capture of certain specimens, and others—particularly the flowering plants—required preliminary drying treatments before they could be reliably cast. Sheila’s skillful placement, manipulation, and molding of seeds, leaves, and petals are evidenced throughout the collection.

A number of specimens are particularly noteworthy. Albizia julibrissin ‘Rosea’, a cultivar of silk tree, features a pair of long, flattened pods resembling that of Pisum sativum, the common pea. In contrast, the seedpod specimen of Calycanthus floridus demonstrates its squat, bulbous form in alternate viewpoints: one pod is split, with its seeds visible inside, while the other is left intact. The arrangement for Cedrus libani (Cedar of Lebanon), one of the larger pieces in the collection, features a mature cone as its centerpiece. Scales and a seedling lie alongside the cone for size comparison.

These and other wonderful examples demonstrate the skill and creativity that Sheila contributed to the process, and the works stand on their own as compelling examples of three-dimensional botanical art. We invite you to explore this collection on your next visit to our Reading Room, open weekdays from 10:00am–3:45pm.