A Picture is Worth…

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Most gardeners are as passionate about photographing their plants as they are about growing them. Those of us who work in public horticulture—in gardens, historic and natural landscapes, or botanical collections—appear to be similarly afflicted, only more so. Collectively, our photographs, slides, and most recently digital images often span great periods of time and always contribute the unique perspective of the photographer. These images capture the changes, some subtle, some abrupt, that have transformed and shaped our gardens. They trace the history of our collections and they also record our events and activities, celebrations, classes, lectures, visitors and staff. Photographs of our plants and gardens are equally important as a resource for our scientific and educational programs and our landscape management plans.

Recently developed management and delivery systems enable access not only to the image but also to a wealth of associated data. Previously inaccessible material can now be made available by digitizing images created in different formats or housed in disparate collections. From an institutional standpoint, digitization allows horticultural librarians and photo archivists to retrieve and provide visual and intellectual access to the images of our plants and our landscapes. In networked environments, web-hosted image catalogs transcend the stand-alone database and make this information available to researchers, curators, managers, and visitors whether they are onsite, at an educational kiosk on the grounds, or in the field working from a laptop.

Arnold’s Collection

Begun in the 1880s as an adjunct to the Arboretum’s living, library, and herbarium collections, today the Arnold Arboretum’s visual collection consists of over 50,000 photographs and transparencies with the library and the living collections department holding the greatest number. Living collections has over 16,000 35mm slides that are used for teaching, and because BG-BASE is used to manage our living collections, curatorial staff has the option of using its image module to track individual accessions. The library curates the 35,000 images that make up the photograph archives. Black-and-white and color prints, 35mm slides, and their predecessor, lantern slides, document not only individual specimens growing on our grounds, but depict these same taxa growing in their native habitat. The plant collectors and their expeditions are represented along with the people, events, and customs of these exotic landscapes. Historical photographs of other plant collections, private gardens, and parks throughout the world round out the collection.

In 1996 Harvard launched the Library Digital Initiative, a University-
wide effort to make collections available online and to link objects of related interest. One of the first steps toward that goal was the creation of VIA (Visual Information Access), a publicly accessible union catalog of the slides, photographs, prints, posters, trade cards, and other objects and artifacts held in Harvard's libraries, museums and archives.

The Views
In 1999, the Arboretum received a grant that enabled us to participate in Harvard’s Digital Initiative, and since then we have been able to catalog, digitize, and deposit over 4,000 images. Among those that we selected was one collection of special interest and value simply labeled “views.” These 1,463 photographs reflect the overall look of the Arnold Arboretum’s landscape—its hilltops, valleys, distant vistas, and distinct plant groupings such as the oak, lilac, rhododendron, and conifer collections—rather than the individual specimens within it. Views of our road and path systems are complemented by studies of our buildings, stone walls, and ornamental iron gates. In some instances, these images predate the designed landscape and the planting of our collections and depict remnants of small family farm lots and parts of the “gentleman’s estate” that occupied the land on which the Arboretum was founded. Our history is also reflected in images of the horse-drawn wagons and steam-fired equipment that date from the Arboretum’s construction in the 1890s—the smartly turned out buggies that carried visitors past the lilacs in the early 1900s, and the haystacks mounded up in meadows that document a practice that lasted into the 1930s. All manner of natural disasters—hurricane, drought, flood, and fire—that occurred during our 132 years of existence have been captured through a camera's lens. These images are both a source of information about our history and a record upon which to develop future landscape management plans.

In many cases a “view” is so compelling that generations of Arboretum staff members and photographers have stood at virtually the same location to expose a glass plate or to point and shoot. Bussey Brook Valley is one of those places. Although the valley transects the conifer collection, many native oaks and a stand of American beech that predate the Arboretum’s existence add to the landscape.

In 1899, Alfred Rehder, known more for his taxonomic work than for his photographs, was the first to capture the vista. Taken in fall after the grasses were mowed but before the leaves had dropped, his image depicts a broad valley dominated by two oaks. A stone bridge and a very young collection of conifers occupy the far distance. The Arboretum hired Thomas Marr, a professional photographer in 1903, and for over 15 years, Marr documented the Arboretum’s landscape, eventually producing over 85 images. Shot in May 1903, Marr’s Bussey Brook Valley looks lush and verdant. The oak on the left has begun to lean towards the brook and the conifers have gained some growth.

During the 1920s and 1930s, Herbert Wendell Gleason, a major American landscape photographer whose work made him an important figure in the national park movement, photographed the Arboretum’s landscape. By June 1929, when Gleason photographed the view, the conifers in the distance and those growing along the edge had begun to crowd the valley view. The two oaks still anchor the middle ground and the leaning one has become a focal point.

The colored image dating from 1940s is a lantern slide, most likely one of Alfred J. Fordham's, the Arboretum’s plant propagator for over 35 years. The oak is now leaning precipitously, and by 1978, the date of the image taken by Albert Bussewitz, a gifted naturalist as well as a photographer, it had disappeared. (The white oak came down in the fall of 1955, a victim of a torrential rainstorm that flooded the valley and undermined its roots.) Nancy LeMay, one of the most creative and exuberant secretaries in the Arboretum’s history, took the last image in the series in 1981. Although her photograph depicts a valley whose width is but a sliver of its former self, the view is now one of mature and magnificent specimens.

Our photographic archives also provide information about landscape features lost over time. Intended to enable more intimate access to the collections than the road system could provide, an extensive pathway system designed by Sargent in the early 1900s, and maintained simply by mowing a path through the herbaceous groundcover, has all but disappeared. Once the practice of regular mowing, rather than only in the spring and fall, was instituted, only one or two paths survived through use by service.
vehicles. By the 1970s, Oak Path, a favorite walk of E. H. Wilson's, existed only in the pages of his book and in archival images. A renovation of the grounds initiated by Peter Shaw Ashton, the director in the 1980s, used the historical photographs to revitalize the pathway system.

Another view often photographed, and a good example of how landscape management can be informed through photographic records, is that of the southern slope of Bussey Hill. Usually referred to as the "overlook," almost every image of this grassy hillside shows a seemingly sacrosanct open vista that remained unchanged over time. It was, however, once fully occupied by an orchard-like stand of ornamental cherry trees. The double-flowered cherries of eastern Asia interested both C. S. Sargent and E. H. Wilson, and in 1917 Sargent wrote that it was "unfortunate that there is no hillside in the Arboretum which can be covered with these trees ... only room for a few isolated individuals has been found." The planting of a large group on the open southern slope of Bussey Hill in 1922 provided a solution to Sargent's wish. Our meticulous plant records show that all the plants were removed in 1944 "because in this location susceptible to winter injury. D[onald] W[yman]."

Because plants are recorded as individual specimens, it is not easy to piece together the history of a collection. In fact, the single image of this collection was our only clue to its 22-year-long existence and the major change in landscape management that its creation and removal made.

Accessing the Arboretum's Digital Images
Our digital images may be seen by accessing VIA through the Harvard Library website http://lib.harvard.edu and clicking on VIA either under "other catalogs" on the drop down menu of catalogs or through the Arboretum's Library Webpage http://www.arboretum.harvard.edu/library/library.html and clicking on The Arboretum's Landscape, Images from 1892 to 2000. To capture the largest number of our landscape views and their records on VIA's search screen, use the keywords Living Collections with the term Anywhere and select "Limit to holdings of:" Arnold Arboretum/Horticulture Library (Jamaica Plain). Adding additional keywords can narrow the number of results. Your results can be saved in an electronic file, sent by email, or printed.

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