During the growing season, curatorial staff conduct field checks of plants in the living collection within discrete regions of the Arboretum landscape. Completed inventories document plant health, ensure the authenticity of mapped features, and identify specimens that require new or revised plant labels. Beyond these essential activities, our daily work in the collection also presents opportunities to marvel at the diversity of plants amassed and stewarded by the Arboretum over the past 140 years. Steeped in history and possessing fine ornamental qualities, our accessions of Thuja standishii (Japanese arborvitae) epitomize the many remarkable specimens we field checked over the year.

Native to Japan, T. standishii is represented in the Arboretum’s living collections by four plants. The oldest and arguably most ornamental among these are two specimens (17517*C,D) germinated from seed collected in 1890 by Heinrich Mayr (1856–1911) in Yezo (Hokkaido), Japan. Both sumptuously broad, the largest (17517*C) of these centenarians has achieved a height of approximately 50 feet and a diameter of 21 inches. Their stately trunks display crimson-hued bark, which exfoliates in tan strips. Additional accessions of Japanese arborvitae include a 1972 cutting (892-72*A) from one of the aforementioned plants and a 1983 acquisition (1208-83*A) from Longwood Gardens via Washington Park Arboretum and Highland Park Herbarium. All four plants are in good condition.

Coveted for the quality of its wood, T. standishii grows in its native country on rocky mountain slopes at elevations between 1,600 and 8,000 feet. During the Edo Period (1603–1867), protected old-growth forests were harvested strictly for the construction of temples and residences for the ruling class. Famed Arboretum plant explorer E. H. Wilson noted in The Conifers and Taxads of Japan, “... although ordinary trees could be cut by anyone, the Nezu (Thuja standishii), Hinoki (Chamaecyparis obtusa), Swara (C. pisifera), Asuhi (Thuja p. dolabrata), and Keaki (Zelkova serrata) might not have so much as a twig broken off, armed foresters being placed to shoot all wood poachers. Any peasant found in possession of a utensil made of one of these five forbidden kinds of wood was arrested.” Periods of forest clearing followed the relaxation of the edicts and old-growth forests in contemporary Japan are currently restricted to 26 sites covering less than one percent of the country’s total land area. Unabated demand for Japanese arborvitae wood has ushered in an era of intensive silviculture, yielding raw materials for the manufacture of furniture and other consumer products.

The stories of T. standishii and thousands of other fascinating plants continue to gain shape through our documentation of living specimens grown at the Arboretum. In 2011, we inventoried fourteen percent of the living collection (or 2,051 plants) across 32 acres of the Arboretum landscape. Noteworthy among our outcomes, we conducted inaugural assessments for 85 plants, “resurrected” 47 plants that had been previously recorded as dead, affixed new labels to 741 plants, and acquired GPS coordinates for all plants in the “Rockery” following this area’s extensive horticultural renovation. In 2012, our efforts will focus on plants defining the contours of Bussey Hill—another landscape of remarkable plants to assess and celebrate.