

Travels of a “Real Naturalist”

Since coming aboard as Botanical Collections Manager at the Wellesley College Botanic Gardens, the scope of and excitement about the future of the garden became immediately apparent. With the demolition of the conservatories pending and final input required on the new state-of-art Global Flora greenhouse, it feels at times I was thrown right away into a fast moving river.

What plants will be part of the new conservatory, and where will we get them? What final details of the design need tweaking? Which experts can I call upon for advice? Fortunately after 40 years in the botanic garden world, I have a good network of botanists, curators and conservatory managers and a surprisingly good number of them will respond to my calls and emails.

Prior to applying to my new position, I had been invited to speak at a symposium on *Torreya taxifolia*, a critically endangered conifer found only in the Florida panhandle. As E.O. Wilson, one of the greatest biologists of the last hundred years, was the keynote speaker, I interrupted my new labors at Wellesley to fly south to attend.

Torreya taxifolia, the stinking cedar, is found only in a 65 kilometer stretch along the Apalachicola River, in a unique habitat of botanically diverse ravines. Beginning in the 1930s, the population of stinking cedar began to crash, due to a new species of fungal blight or perhaps a new mutation of an old one. Like the chestnut, all adult trees are now dead and botanists enacted a rescue program, collecting cuttings of the remaining trees, rooting them, and securing them in botanic gardens in the eastern US and Europe before the pending extinction. I had rooted 4000 cuttings in the 1980s and 1990s so was asked to share some perspectives about *Torreya*.

My talk focused on the four distinct eras in the long history of *Torreya*;

- The Prehuman Era (*Torreya* has a 175 million year history of growing on earth).
- The Era of Human Usage; the six species of *Torreya* in China, Japan,



Conservationists and scientists, including biologist E.O. Wilson (center, with microphone), gathered in Torreya State Park to discuss strategies to save the beleaguered Florida torrey tree. CAMILA GUILLEN, UF/IFAS

Korea and the US have been used a medicine, food (the large nuts), weaponry (bows) and timber.

- The Era of Collection as estates and botanic gardens began to amass diverse collections of plants.
- The Era of Conservation: half the species of *Torreya* are on the IUCN Redlist of endangered species.

After my talk E.O. Wilson pulled me aside to chat and gave me perhaps the greatest compliment of my life; “You are a real naturalist.”

The latter part of the day included a nature hike in Torreya State Park to an old stone bridge in the Torreya ravines. We planted a *Torreya* seedling in honor of Dr. Wilson and he sat and spoke with us, answering questions, a witty and wise sage of nature. Nature reasserted itself when a venomous copperhead was discovered coiled under the knapsack of the woman seated next to me. But even at my late age it was nice to find I can still get inspired by the words of a great biologist and author like E.O. Wilson.

After the conference I spent two days at the Atlanta Botanic Garden, which has amassed one of the best conservatory collections in the world under the

direction of their Vice President of Conservatories, Ron Determann. The non-hardy plant collections number in the thousands and I was allowed to take cuttings or divisions from 123 species, all picked for their diverse form, which is the thematic basis of Wellesley’s new conservatory. Choice items such as *Cinchona pubescens* (quinine) were packed in the box. A dozen superb begonias, in. Rare ferns and lycopods, check. Endangered palms, succulents from Madagascar, tropical Calatheas with stunning leaves (one *Calathea plowmanii* was named for my old TA at Harvard, Tim Plowman), all collected and packed. *Methysticodendrom amesianum*, a plant I had collected in the Sibundoy Valley of Colombia decades ago, came back to me as a rooted cutting from Ron.

To have a blank slate, and to be tasked to fill a new temple of biodiversity with inspiring species is a plant lover’s dream. It is a quiet pleasure to know, after I have departed this planet, that the plants I helped to select and propagate will inspire others, young and old, as they inspired me.

by Rob Nicholson, Botanical Collections Manager