



COLLECTION PROFILE

Stewartia Collection

AT THE Polly Hill Arboretum

Tim Boland

Located in West Tisbury, Massachusetts, on the island of Martha's Vineyard, which lies five miles off the southeast coast of Cape Cod, the Polly Hill Arboretum was founded in 1997 and opened to the public in 1998. While the arboretum is young as a public garden, the first plantings occurred in 1958 in what was to become the grand horticultural experiment of one remarkable woman, Mary Louisa Hill, better known as Polly Hill.

In 1927 Polly's family purchased the land—an abandoned sheep farm—that eventually became the summer home of the Hill family. Over the next 30 years several of the old buildings were modernized to accommodate the family and summer visitors. Polly and her husband, Julian, raised three children and eventually inherited the farm. The idea of growing an arboretum first emerged in Polly's mind in 1957 when she was 50. A few courses in botany at the University of Delaware and others at Longwood Gardens gave her the impetus to start.

The Arboretum's buildings and landscapes today present a classic New England rural setting framed by nearly 4,000 feet of rambling stone walls that define the spatial quality of the landscape and create an ideal backdrop for ornamental plantings.

Polly's approach to starting the arboretum was one marked with patience and a humble sense of time. Because she did not like the practice of planting mature plants in the landscape, the majority of her plantings were started from seed. As Polly explained, "You miss the plants in their teenage (juvenile) years; these after all are the most interesting years!" Planting open pollinated seed in the ground without the benefit of a greenhouse was a truly Darwinian approach to horticulture—survival of the fittest. Through her dedication and keen eye, Polly raised several noteworthy plants over the next 30 years. She would eventually gain notoriety and honors both nationally and internationally for her outstanding contributions to the world of horticulture.

Polly, known for her practical manner and her dedication to her plantings, inspired numerous admirers. The nonprofit organization, the Polly Hill Arboretum Inc., was created to preserve Polly's botanical and horticultural legacy and to continue Polly's ideals of research, education, and conservation. The establishment of the Arboretum was accomplished through donations by David H. Smith, the Hill family, and many of Polly's horticultural colleagues. Today, at the age of 99, she still maintains close

1. The Japanese Stewartia cultivar 'Mint Frills' petals have hints of green on over-sized blossoms.
 2. The silky camellia cultivar 'Delmarva', a Polly Hill introduction
 3. The crimson fall color and seed display of the Japanese Stewartia
 4. The beaked Stewartia from China is rare in North American plant collections.
- Background:** The wonderful expressive bark of the Japanese Stewartia

contact with the Arboretum. During her last summer season on the island in 2002, I asked Polly what we could do to preserve and enhance her horticultural legacy. Her response was pure Polly, "Grow!"

The Stewartia Collection

The existing *Stewartia* collection is the result of Polly Hill's lifelong interest and her friendship with many public garden professionals. Polly first became fascinated by the genus after witnessing the bloom of the North American silky camellia, *Stewartia malacodendron*. Her long association with the Arnold Arboretum in Jamaica Plain, Massachusetts, led to many of the plants in the collection. Of particular note is her friendship with Dr. Stephen A. Spongberg, former horticultural taxonomist at the Arnold and director emeritus of the Polly Hill Arboretum. Dr. Spongberg

The mountain camellia is rarely cultivated in North American gardens.

authored the monograph of the genus in 1974 and is widely recognized as an international authority on *Stewartia*.

The growing conditions on the Vineyard are almost ideal for *Stewartia* with the regularly occurring summer drought the only limiting factor. During the summer months drought-stressed trees receive supplemental irrigation. The current soil conditions are determined by the geology and the past agricultural uses of the site. The dominant soil types result from morainal deposits over a broad area of the Arboretum. Predominantly, the soil has an acidic base (pH 4.8–5.8) and is very free draining. The regional and local climates are strongly influenced by the maritime effect of our island location. We are classified as USDA Zone 7a. The majority of our trees were raised from seed with 84 percent derived from cultivated sources, 16 percent from wild collected seed. We currently have 17 taxa which include 9 cultivars named by Polly Hill.

Goals for the Collection and Plans for the Future

North American Plant Collections Consortium (NAPCC) status was awarded to the collection in August 2005.

While this designation recognizes the hard work and dedication of Polly Hill and the staff of the Arboretum for its past work, much more potential exists within the genus. Our new collection policy targets plants from the Atlantic Coastal Plain and Japan. This past year I traveled to Japan and collected seed from the Japanese *stewartia*. Future trips to Japan will target the sawtooth *stewartia*, *Stewartia serrata*, which is rare in cultivation in North America, and the tall *stewartia*, *Stewartia monadelphica*. The Arnold Arboretum plans to submit its *stewartia* collection for NAPCC recognition with a strong emphasis on wild provenance collections. This is a wonderful opportunity for our institutions to collaborate on future projects. Recent collection activities of the Arnold's senior research scientist, Peter Del Tredici, have focused on collecting the beaked *stewartia*, *Stewartia rostrata*, and *Stewartia sinensis*, from China.

While the Asiatic species hold great interest and allure for their ornamental qualities, the two North American species are remarkable for their elegant beauty; however, the American *stewartias* are notorious for their difficulty in propagation both by seed and cuttings. The silky *stewartia*, *Stewartia malaco-*



dendron, and the mountain camellia, *Stewartia ovata*, have a limited presence in North American plant collections. The Arboretum plans to collect more wild seed over the next several years. Our impressive collection of *stewartia* reveals the dedication and legacy of Polly Hill. Many beautiful mass plantings are in prominent visitor locations throughout the Arboretum. The beautiful bark, pristine white summer flowers, and many species with rich fall color provide interest in all seasons. For more information about our collections, please visit our website at www.pollyhillarboretum.org.

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A large planting of the Japanese *stewartia* takes center stage in the Fall.