

An Arboretum destination

The *Cornus kousa* allée

Perhaps the most impressive landscape feature at the Polly Hill Arboretum consists of the thirty trees that stretch 284 feet from between the Gym and the Homestead buildings in two parallel rows into the old Nursery Field. Forming an avenue, this double row of trees is referred to as an *allée*, the French term for lane, walk, avenue, or drive. Twenty-eight of the trees that comprise this walkway are individuals of a single species, *Cornus kousa* Hance, the so-called Kousa dogwood, *kousa* being the Japanese



T.W. Lasker

name for the tree. Two exceptions are fine specimens of *Carpinus tschonoskii* Maxim., Japanese hornbeam. These specimens, which flank the entrance to the old Nursery Field on the north side of the old stone wall, remain from the original attempt at establishing an allée in 1960. That year several hornbeams were planted to form an allée, but all were defoliated by a hurricane later that year, and all but the two existing plants were killed during the subsequent winter. As a consequence of this loss, Polly began planting saplings of the Kousa dogwood that she had raised from seeds primarily collected from trees growing in the garden of Dr. M. M. Brubaker in Chadds Ford, Pennsylvania.

Flowering from mid- to late June and into early July, the mature specimens of Kousa dogwood that now comprise the allée create a spectacular flowering display and offer the keen observer a textbook example of variation within a single species. Likewise, later in the season the wonderful, bright red strawberry-like fruits create an impressive autumnal display. And during all seasons – winter included – the lovely mottled bark of the trunks and limbs of mature speci-

mens gives the trees a year-round ornamental appeal. It is this type of variation – differences between individual plants in habit, flower bract shape, bract size and attitude as well as the orientation of the multitude of flowers on the branchlets, not to mention disease resistance and foliar and fruit characters – that provides the horticulturist with food for thought. Anyone familiar with Polly knows she carefully and methodically identified the most superior plants through careful observations over many growing seasons. In this process, she took every opportunity to gain the opinions of fellow horticulturists when they visited the property. Of the Kousa dogwoods growing in the allée, seven were selected by Polly (one in partnership with Tennessee nurseryman, Don Shadow) and given cultivar names. These include 'Big Apple', 'Blue Shadow', 'Gay Head', 'Julian', 'Pollywood', 'Snowbird', and 'Square Dance'. Asexual propagation material of these cultivars has been distributed widely, and most are now commercially available in the nursery trade. Also, many have been praised as among the most superior selections of *Cornus kousa*. For descriptions of the Kousa cultivars Polly has selected, reference should be made to *My Plant Introductions*, authored by Polly, which is available in the Visitors' Center.

As the allée has evolved over time and inferior or diseased trees have been removed and replacements planted, several of Polly's selections have been replicated and are represented more than once along the avenue. These plants, to be true to

The bark of mature specimens of the Kousa dogwood exfoliates, creating a very attractive mottled pattern that provides year-round interest, even in winter.



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name – and like those now available commercially – were propagated asexually and are genetically identical to the original selections. One gap currently exists on the west side of the allée, and we intend to plant a new Kousa dogwood – the selection or cultivar yet to be determined – this spring to fill the void.

Cornus kousa is a close ally of several other well-known dogwoods with large leaflike bracts that subtend the small clusters of true flowers. These include our native eastern North American *Cornus florida* L., the flowering dogwood, which is particularly common in the Appalachian region and a favorite ornamental tree. By contrast, the Kousa dogwood is native to eastern Asia in Korea, Japan, and central China. It was initially introduced into cultivation in

North America by George Rogers Hall, who sent plants from Japan in the early 1860s, and the Chinese form, sometimes known as *Cornus kousa* var. *chinensis* Osborn, was introduced into western cultivation for the Arnold Arboretum by Ernest Henry Wilson in 1907. Another species of the so-called large-bracted dogwoods, *Cornus nuttallii* Audubon, the Pacific dogwood, is native to western North America from British Columbia southward in the mountains into California, while *Cornus canadensis* L., bunchberry or dwarf cornel, is an herbaceous member of this alliance that has a wide distribution in the boreal forests of North America and eastern Asia. These additional species are also in cultivation at the Polly Hill Arboretum, and we invite you to come to see them all. But by all means, don't fail to visit when the Kousa dogwood allée is in flower and fruit. You will feel the marvel!

– S. A. Sponberg