Lilies for
"Chinese"
Wilson

Christopher Reed

Stand in the churchyard just off the main street of Chipping Campden, Gloucestershire, village of golden stone. Admire the opulence of the lilies flourishing there in a newly planted memorial garden. And think of Chipping Campden's own native son Ernest Henry "Chinese" Wilson, in extremis on a mountain path in the wilderness of the Sino-Tibetan border. It is 1910 and Wilson has just made the most satisfying discovery of an adventure-filled career. At an altitude of 5,500 feet, near the Min River, proceeding down a rough trail, the great plant-hunter is caught in a sudden rock slide. His leg is crushed, broken in two places, and medical help is four days away. The leg will never heal properly; he will limp. His bearers fashion a splint out of a camera tripod—hurriedly since a further rain of rock may come at any moment. Gingerly, they move on, only to meet a mule caravan coming upward. The path is too narrow for the beasts to pass by the injured botanist. "There was only one thing to do. As I lay on the ground and more than forty of these animals stepped over my prostrate form, the hooves seemed enormous, blotting out my view of the heavens. The instinctive sure-footedness of the mule is well known, and I realized it with my gratitude as these animals one by one passed over me and not one even frayed my clothing."

The treasure Wilson had found was the regal lily, Lilium regale, the single plant of all his finds upon which, he declared, he would proudly rest his reputation. "The price I paid has been staked," said Wilson. "The regal lily was worth it—and more."

In six expeditions to the flora-rich East, Wilson found and carried home with him some two thousand kinds of plants new to Western horticulture, including representatives of four genera and over four hundred species previously ungrown here. He collected a hundred thousand herbarium specimens for good measure. Chinese Wilson had courage, perseverance, and the genius to recognize immediately the horticultural virtues of the plants he encountered.

Wilson was born in 1876 in Chipping Campden, the most beautiful Cotswold market town and historic center of the wool trade. He was educated as a gardener at the Birmingham Botanic Garden and the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, and as a botanist at the Royal College of Science, London. In 1899 he went off to China on the first of two plant-hunting expeditions for the British nurserymen, the Messrs. Veitch, stopping en route at Harvard's Arnold Arboretum to learn the latest techniques in seed collection and preservation. His particular mission was to collect seeds of the dove tree, Dacrydium...
**involucrata**, sometimes called the handkerchief tree because it covers itself with large, white, handkerchief-shaped bracts in May. This beauty had been described to Europeans but never possessed by them. When Wilson was led to the only known specimen of the tree he found it had been turned into boards to build the wall of a house. A minor setback. He later discovered a whole grove of dove trees, and came home with seeds aplenty.

The Messrs. Veitch hit hard times, so Wilson did the rest of his traveling for the Arnold Arboretum. He prospered, and in 1927 succeeded his mentor Charles Sprague Sargent as keeper (director) of what Wilson called “America’s greatest garden.” It was a post he would not hold long. In 1930 his life ended—prosaically for such a trooper—in an automobile accident.

In the early 1970s the noted furniture designer, the late Sir Gordon Russell, also of Chipping Campden, suggested that a memorial garden be established in the town to mark the centennial of Wilson’s birth. The idea was firmly planted in the minds of the city fathers, but it was slow to germinate. In 1980 the town acquired the lower half of the large vicarage garden, about an acre in size and perfect for their purposes. It fronted on the graceful, curved main street and afforded a fine view of the tower of the church, originally Norman, but transformed in the fifteenth century by graceful local wool merchants into one of the grandest of Cotswold buildings. The Wilson garden was laid out after a design by Sir Peter Shepheard, and opened to the public in May 1984.

It’s a very young garden. Soon it will be beautiful. Now it is interesting. Naturally, the Ernest Wilson Memorial Garden is planted entirely with horticultural gems introduced by Wilson. He provided plenty to work with: camellias, rhododendrons, deutzias, primulas, viburnums, magnolias, daphnes, dogwoods, conifers, hydrangeas, currants, lilacs, roses, honeysuckles, lilacs. When the garden opened it contained 126 kinds of plants, but the town council slowly augments the collection as the generosity of contributors permits. A few plants have especially rich associations, for they are cuttings from original stock collected by Wilson and now growing at the Arnold Arboretum. The present director, Peter Ashton, delivered them personally. He would gladly bring more but hasn’t been asked to do so, perhaps because Campodonians live in the best gardening country on earth and do not think to send to frigid America for supplies.

One of England’s most celebrated gardens, Hidcote Manor, is just three miles outside Chipping Campden, on a hill overlooking the Vale of Evesham and a Cotswold patchwork of ploughland and pasture. One approaches through sheep. The creator, Major Lawrence Johnston, started with a windswept site and so for protection grew many fine hedges of yew, holly, and copper beech. They define and unite a series of outdoor rooms, each with its own distinctive garden, the whole occupying some ten acres. Johnston was a shy, private man who lived with seven dachshunds and his mother, an American, who provided the funds for this undertaking. He began his planting in 1907, and over the next four decades created what is undeniably a work of art, larger than the sum of its lovely parts. Hidcote Manor has been a profound influence on gardeners of this century, a tastemaker. It is now owned by the National Trust and open to the public.

If you visit Hidcote, why not stop just down the lane at Kiftsgate Court?
**Explorations**

Less exalted, but still quite something, it features perhaps the biggest rose in England, *Rosa filipes* “Kiftsgate,” which rambles over a wall measuring eighty by ninety by fifty feet. The present owner, Mrs. Binny, smoking a cigarillo, will meet you at the gate on open days, sell you a ticket, and tell you how her house at the top of the hill above her steeply sloping garden came to have its elegant Palladian portico. A century ago the then lord of the manor lived in Mickleton, in the valley. When he decided to build at Kiftsgate, he construct-

**FOR THE TRAVELER**

Begin hobnobbing straightaway and fly British Airways, on which the stewardesses speak a language curiously similar to our own. BA serves fifteen American cities.

Trains and buses run from London to the Cotswolds, but try to be brave and drive despite the left-handedness of the experience and the absence of British restraint on the road, where everything happens at fifteen miles per hour faster than it should. Godfrey Davis is a British car rental firm with numerous offices; Avis has an itinerary service and knows about gardens.

A map showing the location of all major gardens in England is newly available from the British Tourist Authority, 40 West 57th Street, New York, N.Y., 10019 (212-581-4700).

*Horticulture* magazine offers a tour that includes the Cotswolds. For details: Lynette Churchill, 755 Boylston Street, Boston, 02116 (617-247-4100). Serendipity Tours, 3 Channing Circle, Cambridge, Mass., 02138, plans an expedition next year.

If you would like a six-day course in English architecture and decorative arts (with visits to Hidcote Manor and other beauty spots), and would enjoy staying with a small group of like-minded folk as guests in an English countryside house, and would be amused to dress for dinner, consider having an Art Experience. Write Malise Ropner, 48 Campden Street, London W8 7ET, for more.

If what you wish you had were some English friends who would take you in and treat you well, and give you as much or as little attention as you desired (who might, for example, drive you around the Cotswolds in their car), At Home Country Holidays will probably delight you. Write Angela Rhodes James, The Stone House, Great Gransden, Sandy, Bedfordshire SG19 3AF, and tell her your requirements.

If you’re reclusive and just want a good expensive hotel, try Lygon Arms, Broadway, Hereford and Worcester WR12 7OJ, the big, luxury hotel in the Cotswolds. Ask for the old section, where Charles I and Oliver Cromwell preceded you. Or Buckland Manor Hotel, Buckland, Hereford and Worcester WR12 7LX, outside Broadway, with eleven elegant rooms and good food. Less expensive but worthy: Dormy House, Willenshay, Broadway, Hereford and Worcester WR12 7LJ; The Greenway, Shurdington, Gloucestershire GL51 5UG, a small hotel in a sixteenth-century manor in Cheltenham; and The Feathers Hotel, Market Street, Woodstock, Oxfordshire OX7 2SX, near Blenheim Palace, a favorite of Oxford students when they feel expansive. —C.R.  

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ed a railroad and had the Georgian façade of his house moved uphill with him.

Hidcote and Kiftsgate are about 36 miles north of Oxford and twelve miles south of Stratford-upon-Avon. Leaving them, heading south, stop at Sezincote, near Moreton-in-Marsh. This is an astonishing establishment. In 1805 Samuel Pepys Cockerell remodeled a normal country house in Indian style for his brother Sir Charles, who had made his fortune in the East India Company. Rising weirdly out of perfect English parkland is an Indian palace complete with peacock windows, minarets, and an onion dome. The house later influenced the Prince Regent’s choice of design for the Brighton Pavilion. Beautiful gardens surround a stream that meanders through the grounds. One comes upon sculpted Brahman bulls, a fountain in the form of a snake, and a temple to the sun god Surya.

Slightly further south in Lower Swell, near Stow-on-the-Wold (“where the wind blows cold”), is Abbotswood, which, alas, is open to the public only occasionally (usually on Sundays in April and May, but, as with all these gardens, better check before you go). This is a country house designed by Sir Edwin Lutyens, with extensive water and flower gardens designed by him and planted by Gertrude Jekyll, a gardening savant of immense reputation and stature. Gardens designed by superb architects and furnished by connoisseurs of plants are rare, and marvelous. Lutyens and Jekyll did scores of them around the turn of the century, but they and most of their gardens are dust.

Just a few miles away visit the manor house in Upper Slaughter. It features terraced gardens full of roses, and the remains of a fifteenth-century priory crypt haunted by ghostly children, who laugh. Lower Slaughter is arguably the most picturesque village in England, and each little cottage around the green boasts a luxuriant garden. One doesn’t need to visit the Cotswolds’ great estates to overdose on horticulture. The tour can go on and on. And remember, in your ramblings, there’s scarcely a garden—little or large, there or here—that doesn’t owe something of its loveliness to Ernest Henry “Chinese” Wilson. If you would find his monument, look around you.