When Northwest gardeners think of the borage family (Boraginaceae), herbaceous genera like Pulmonaria, Brunnera and Cerinthe usually come to mind. But this circumglobal family of 150 genera and 2700 species is also host to many tropical and sub-tropical trees and shrubs. Two of these woody genera, Cordia and Ehretia, are hardy in temperate zones.

There are two representative of the genus Ehretia in the Arboretum. A specimen of the largeleaf ehretia, Ehretia dicksonii, came to us from Dan Hinkley in July of 1990. It was planted out in 1992, next to an older E. acuminata along a gravel path leading from Azalea Way to Rhododendron Glen, just north of Azalea Way Pond. It can be immediately recognized by its corky, deeply furrowed bark and leathery leaves. In little over 20 years, it has become a robust tree over 40 feet high and is one of the rare summer-bloomers in the Arboretum.

In his book “Trees of Seattle,” Arthur Lee Jacobson reports only three Ehretia dicksonii in the Seattle area, including the Arboretum’s
single specimen. This despite the fact that the tree is quite attractive, producing copious, fragrant white flowers in dome-like cymes from mid-July to mid-August, followed by clusters of cherry-sized yellow fruits, which are favored by birds. The species is native to open forests in China, Japan, Bhutan, Vietnam, Taiwan and Nepal. It was introduced into cultivation in the West by the famed English botanist Ernest Wilson. (See “The Arnold Arboretum, Part 2: The Explorers,” page 14.)

On his website, Jacobson says he’s aware of just a single *Ehretia acuminata* in the Seattle area, and that’s the one in the Arboretum. This specimen—our plant is still labeled with the old name *E. thyrsiflora*—came to us from Brian Mulligan’s private collection in 1978 as a four-foot sapling. He had received it from the Morris Arboretum outside Philadelphia, a provenance that might indicate a very hardy tree. When it was planted out in 1983, it had already reached the height of eight feet; but it has barely doubled in size in the last 30–odd years. Its foliage is longer and more pointed than that of *E. dicksonii*. (The specific epithet, *acuminata*, translates to acuminate, which means “tapering to a long point” in botanical lingo.) The plant’s fragrant, white summer flowers, produced in loose, open panicles—that Jacobson compares to those of privet—are also followed by yellow fruits.

*Ehretia acuminata* is one of the widest-ranging members of the genus, which comprises about 50 species altogether. It grows wild in China, Japan, Nepal, Vietnam, New Guinea and Australia, among other countries, and is quite variable within its range. (The common name of the plant “Down Under” is Koda tree.) It can reach nearly 90 feet in height and is used throughout its range as a lumber tree for building and making furniture. Though a minor player in the Chinese pharmacopoeia, it—along with many other members of the genus—is being studied for its complex alkaloids, which may have anti-inflammatory properties.

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**Daniel Mount** is an estate gardener, garden writer, and member of the “Bulletin” Editorial Board. He lives on a small farm in the Snoqualmie Valley. Read more of his reflections on plants and gardening at www.mountgardens.com.

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**Celebrating Ehret**

The genus *Ehretia* is named for the German botanical artist Georg Dionysius Ehret (1708–70). Born into a family of Heidelberg market gardeners, Ehret developed a keen interest in plants at an early age. His skills as an illustrator and botanist brought him in contact with many important naturalists and patrons, most notably Linnaeus, with whom he learned the finer aspects of botanical science. Ehret is admired to this day for his sumptuous Rococo style and exacting botanical accuracy. He spent the later half of his life teaching botanical illustration to the daughters of English aristocracy, many of whom became important botanical artists themselves. Pictured left is Ehret’s illustration of *Selenicereus grandiflorus*, from “Plantae Selectae” (1750).