My interest in the Chilean fire tree or Chilean fire bush, *Embothrium coccineum*, intensified in 2004, during a chance conversation with Van Bobbitt, retired horticulture instructor at South Seattle College and former UW Botanic Gardens employee. He told me about a very floriferous specimen growing in his front garden. A short time later, I drove by to see it in full flower, and (WOW!) it was fabulous. At the time, plans were being drawn up for the Chilean entry garden and forest in the Pacific Connections Garden, and I knew the fire tree was to be included. I made it my special quest to ensure that we made a home for some offspring from Van’s tree—subsequently nicknamed the “Bobbitt Tree”—in the Arboretum.

Native throughout the temperate forests of Chile—at many altitudes, as well as in parts of Argentina—*Embothrium coccineum* is a bit of a botanical chameleon. Though usually evergreen, it is occasionally deciduous, and these latter forms

ABOVE: The Chilean fire tree is prized for its stunning late spring flowers and handsome foliage. (Photo by Niall Dunne)
are reputedly hardier. It also varies in habit across its native range, from a diminutive shrub to a small slender tree—but it has been known to grow up to 60 feet in cultivation. The handsome, narrow, shiny green leaves can grow between four and seven inches long. Chilean fire tree has a tendency to sucker (produce growth from the roots), and so is often found naturally in clonal thickets.

In full bloom, the plant is a showstopper. Its long, tubular, crimson–scarlet to orange–scarlet flowers appear on racemes (a type of unbranched flower cluster) in mid–to–late May. There’s variability in how far apart the racemes are spaced. In his “Trees and Shrubs Hardy in the British Isles,” W.J. Bean writes about a special Award of Merit that was given to a specimen named ‘Norquinco form’ in 1947 because the racemes were set so close together on the branch that “it looks as if the tree had donned a number of scarlet ‘plus fours’.” Immediately to me, it seemed obvious that the Bobbitt Tree more closely fit this description.

**Embothrium in the Arboretum**

In 2004, just one sizeable specimen of Chilean fire tree was growing in the Arboretum. It was obtained from a Mr. David Lofgren of Seattle, in 1981, and planted close to Arboretum Drive, right above the current New Zealand Garden. It represents the third attempt at trying to grow
the tree out in the Arboretum, and it still stands today, usually producing a stunning flower display in late spring.

*Embothrium* has a reputation of being a somewhat finicky tree to establish. It requires a relatively sunny spot with good drainage, neutral to acidic soil, and cold-wind protection. During the 1980s, Washington Park Arboretum obtained wild-collected seeds from a variety of sources (Sarah Reichard, Jan Pirzio-Biroli, Dan Hinkley, RHS Wisley and the Arnold Arboretum), and these often produced seedling trees. But, sadly, they all eventually died. Cultural references all state that the tree can be hurt in severe winters, and it appears that many have been winter-killed here. Even after several successive years of new growth, younger trees can succumb.

But we have been persistent and have planted many more specimens in the Arboretum. Today, as I write this, there are at least a half dozen Chilean fire trees growing here, some of them descendants of the “Bobbitt Tree.” Though the Arboretum strives to add only known-provenance materials into the collection, Van’s tree was far too special not to include.

*Embothrium coccinium* is usually only propagated by seed. Cuttings and grafts are almost always total failures. But as mentioned, the tree is known for producing a number of root suckers, from which rooted layers can be dug. Luckily the Bobbitt Tree had a great suckering habit.

In the fall of 2011, the UW Botanic Gardens crew, headed by David Zuckerman, carefully tree-spaded six root suckers from Van’s garden and planted them in both the Pacific Connections
Chilean entry garden (which opened in 2008) and the Gateway to Chile (which opened in 2010). Since then, we have watched four of them begin to establish and two of them die. Two of the four survivors are good-sized specimens. Each May, starting in 2013, I take a personal *Embothrium* tour with UWBG staff to check on the trees’ progress; we will hold our fourth tour this year.

As for the Arboretum’s other attempts at increasing the Chilean fire tree collection in Pacific Connections: So far, we’ve received plants from three different sources. Dan Hinkley provided seedlings from wild-collected specimens in 2006; the Arboretum Foundation donated specimens (sourced from Wells Medina Nursery) from its Pacific Connections-themed display at the 2008 Northwest Flower & Garden Show; and Cistus Nursery in Suavie Island, Oregon, provided specimens in 2010 as part of the main planting of the Gateway to Chile.

Sadly, it seems only one of these plants has survived—a Cistus Nursery specimen growing in the Gateway to Chile. But we will continue our efforts to establish a sizable collection here.

**Embothrium Around the City**

In his “Trees of Seattle” (2nd edition, 2006), Arthur Lee Jacobson wrote that the Chilean fire tree is uncommon here. He listed just 14 locations, including that of the Bobbitt Tree, which he estimated to be 29 feet tall. According to Arthur, the W. B. Clarke Nursery, in San Jose, California—a well-known West Coast nursery—first offered the species in 1946. Carl English, at the Chittenden Locks garden, in Ballard, had specimens by 1948, which in turn gave rise to other plants around the city.

Brianne Zorn, former executive director at the Kruckeberg Botanic Garden (KBG), wrote that “we have three specimens of *Embothrium coccineum* in our garden. The main individual was grown from seed and planted by the house. According to Art Kruckeberg’s recollection, he received it from Carl English. Several of the plants at KBG were from Carl English. This main tree is over 50 years old. It has a pretty thick trunk and extends beyond the second floor of the house. The docents always say that when the Chilean fire tree is in full bloom, it looks like the...”

**Origins of the “Bobbitt Tree”**

The Chilean fire tree in Van Bobbit’s garden—that gave birth to four trees now growing at the Arboretum—has, itself, a connection to the Arboretum. It was a wedding present to Van and his bride, Sharon Wilson, in 1988, from none other than Scot Medbury—then a graduate student in the UW horticulture program. (Now director at Brooklyn Botanic Garden, Scot wrote his Masters thesis on the Olmsted design of the Arboretum and lived for a time in the Stone Cottage.) He believes he purchased this special plant from Greer Gardens in Portland in 1987.

In the winter of 1989, the tree’s single stem suffered freeze damage. With the top broken, it developed a multi-stemmed habit and more shrubby appearance. Most other mature specimens that are found in the city are much taller and more slender.

The late George Pinyuh speculated that the Bobbitt Tree might be the *E. coccineum* ssp. *lanceolatum* ‘Norqinco Valley’ listed on the Greer Gardens’ website (greergardens.com). The site describes the plant as “a cultivar with especially abundant and vivid orange–scarlet flowers from the Norqinco Valley of Argentina and Chile.” Interestingly, Van has observed that his tree “rarely attracts hummingbirds brows–ing the flowers, although most references say that hummingbirds love the Chilean fire tree when in flower.”
house is on fire! According to our database, there are two other specimens, one in the meadow growing next to a Paulownia tomentosa. Both trees are smaller but provide a good vantage point to see the interesting flowers.

During research for this article, one of my best adventures was when I drove Arthur—who knows every important tree in Seattle personally, or at least seems to—to a home garden near Carkeek Park to see the tallest Embothrium in Seattle. Worried that the new owners of the residence might have removed it (that was the rumor!), we were delighted to find it alive and well. It was planted in 1953, and likely died to the ground more than once, but is now—with two trunks—56 feet tall, according to Arthur’s accurate measuring device. To celebrate our success, we then stopped at the U-Village Ram and toasted with a dark brew.

The late George Pinyuh (a WSU extension specialist) had a very tall specimen growing beside his deck at his home in Kent, Washington. This tree was a prolific seed producer, and seedlings have appeared in the Pinyuh garden by the multitudes. Over the years, George happily gave young plants to all his visiting friends. In anticipation of the garden’s eventual sale, Walt Bubelis (see page 3) has been able to pot up seedlings, which we hope can eventually be added to the Arboretum Chilean collection. (The plants are currently growing at Edmonds Community College Greenhouses, under Walt’s supervision.) George’s tree has suffered wind damage and splitting over the years, and last year we feared the tree was dying. But no further decline has taken place, and—perhaps a happy omen—a mother mouse had decided to take up residence in the hollow trunk.

As one drives around Seattle in May, one can occasionally see a spike of red, the sure sign that a knowledgeable gardener once or still does live there. Often the trees are tucked in among others. In my neighborhood, there is a magnificent young specimen strutting its brilliance at 3100 N.E. 65th Street. There are also two street trees struggling for light at 5007 39th Avenue N.E. If you’ve been lucky enough to garner a tour of the famed Ciscoe Morris garden, you’ll know about the lovely specimen that looms in his back yard.

Eric Nelson—a former manager of the Graham Visitors Center—now eagerly watches a growing specimen purchased in a four-inch pot from the Pat Calvert Greenhouse in 1986. When he first planted his tree at his home (4421 2nd Avenue N.W.), he kept a discouraging cloud of chicken wire over it for safety. Finally, after 12 years, he found emerging flower buds. The next day, invitations were issued for an Embothrium party complete with beet salad, Negronis and red-velvet cake.

In spring 2014, Arthur also sent me to the garden of Ron Brightman in Edmonds, where a specimen he calls E. coccineum var. longifolium ‘Inca Flame’ resides. He told me it blooms in April before most others in Seattle. In spring 2015, Ron said it had the most brilliant flower show ever. Perhaps it wanted special mention in this article!

Who knows where my quest to secure more and special Chilean fire trees for the Arboretum will take me next? Nelson Henderson once said, “The true meaning of life is to plant trees under whose shade you do not expect to sit.” My hope is that future generations driving down Lake Washington Boulevard will be dazzled by a wall of fire tree flowers and will then want to slow down, park their cars, and get out to enjoy our wonderful Arboretum.

John Wott is the director emeritus of Washington Park Arboretum and a member of the “Bulletin” Editorial Board.