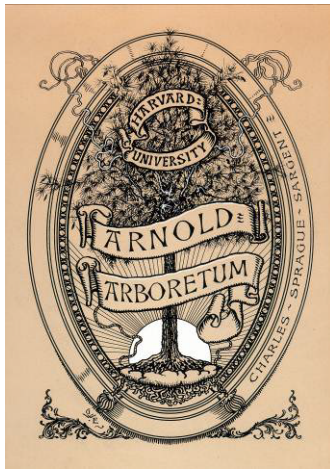


Archives III WP

William Purdom (1880-1921) papers, 1909-1912: Guide.



Harvard University

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III WP

William Purdom (1880-1921) papers, 1909-1912: Guide

Archives of the Arnold Arboretum of Harvard University, Cambridge, MA 02138

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Descriptive Summary

Repository: Archives of the Arnold Arboretum, Harvard University

Call No.: III WP

Location: Archives

Title: William Purdom (1880-1921) papers, 1909-1912.

Date(s): 1909-1912

Creator: Purdom, William, 1880-1921

Quantity: 1 linear foot

Abstract: Compiled by plant explorer William Purdom, this collection consists primarily of correspondence. There are some photographs and documents relating to expedition expenses. Purdom was dispatched to Asia to collect plants for the first time by C. S. Sargent in 1909. Though he would return to Asia later, this collection is comprised of materials dating from 1909-1912.

Note: Access to Finding Aid record in [HOLLIS](#).

Preferred Citation: William Purdom papers. Archives of the Arnold Arboretum of Harvard University.

Additional Material: Additional William Purdom correspondence may be available in the [Arnold Arboretum Correspondence Database](#). See a sample of the specimens collected by Purdom in the Harvard University Herbaria [Index of Botanical Specimens](#).

Acquisition Information

Provenance: This collection was created by William Purdom and acquired by the Arnold Arboretum during and after his trip to China. The collection was transferred from the Arboretum's departmental holdings to the Arboretum's Archives in 1986 when the Archives was established.

Processing Information:

2007, Lisa Pearson. Revised August 2011, Liz Francis. Revised January 2023, October 2024 Larissa Glasser.

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Biographical Note

William Purdom was born in Heversham, Westmoreland, England on April 10, 1880. His early horticultural training began at Brathay Hall Gardens, Ambleside, Cumbria where his father, William, held the position of head gardener. Purdom then worked at the 19th-century nurserymen Low & Sons in Enfield and later for James Veitch (1868-1907) at Coombe Wood, Kingston, Surrey, the original site of the Veitch family's famous nursery. In 1902, Purdom became a sub-foreman of the Arboretum Nurseries at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, and in 1905 enrolled at Kew as a two-year student.

In 1909, Charles Sprague Sargent (1841-1927) the Director of the Arnold Arboretum, was intent on having as many plant collectors as possible engaged in exploring China's flora. With the Arboretum's primary explorer, Ernest Henry Wilson (1876-1930), about to return from southern China and an agreement in place with David Fairchild, Chairman of the Foreign Plant Introduction Section of the USDA, stating that the ornamental plants collected by Frank Meyer (1875-1918) would be shared with the Arboretum, Sargent was eager to dispatch yet another collector to the largely unexplored northeastern provinces of China.

William Purdom, whom Sargent had only met early in 1909, embarked on his first plant expedition in February of that year. Sargent's goal for the young Purdom, the most inexperienced of Arboretum explorers, was to "bring into our gardens Chinese plants from regions with climates even more severe than those of New England." The Veitch Nursery cosponsored the 1909-1912 Purdom expedition as they had the first of Wilson's for the Arboretum. Although Purdom's expedition did not measure up to the successful exploits of Wilson in numbers of new plant introductions, in 1913 a new *Rhododendron*, *Rhododendron purdomii*, was named after him by Alfred Rehder and E. H. Wilson. Purdom did collect seeds and herbarium specimens of many plants and he did take a substantial number of photographs.



Purdom disguised as Chinese coolie. c1911

While he often recorded individual plants, he favored wide vistas of the mountains and valleys of China. Purdom was also interested in the anthropological and ethnographical aspects of the regions he visited and took many close-up shots of the people he encountered, documenting their dress

and their hairstyles. Especially noteworthy is his series of images capturing the “devil dancing” at the now-destroyed monastery in Chone.



“Devil dancing” at Chone. July, 1911

Purdom’s collection techniques improved, and he is now respected for his later success in China with Reginald Farrer (1880-1920) with whom he collected and introduced many new alpine plants. However, his quiet demeanor was again overshadowed by another’s energetic personality. Unlike Purdom, but like Wilson, Farrer was also a prodigious author eager to share his exploits. In his books, *On the Eaves of the World: A Botanical Exploration of the Borders of China and Tibet* (1917) and *The Rainbow*

Bridge (1921), Farrer recounts the adventures of the Kansu Purdom and Farrer expedition of 1914-15.

At the conclusion of the expedition in 1912, Purdom remained in China while Farrer returned to England to work under John Buchan in the Department of Information. That same year the Chinese government established a Forest Service. Nang Han returned from his studies at Cornell University to be China’s senior secretary of the Ministry of Agriculture and Commerce and co-director of the Chinese Forest Service. Forsythe Sherfese, from the United States, served as the other the co-director of the Service, and William Purdom became a division chief within the service.

In addition to his other duties Purdom established tree nurseries to aid in the reforestation of China. In “The House of Veitch” (2002) Shirley Heriz-Smith recounts this era of Purdom’s career: “He was asked to organize a tree planting programme for the Chinese railway and spent much of his time living in a converted railway carriage in remote places. It is said that he established a particularly flourishing forestry station at Kin Han (Isah?) in southern China.” Following a minor operation, Purdom died at the French hospital in Beijing on November 7, 1921.

Scope and Content

This collection contains photographs, correspondence, and financial statements from Purdom’s expeditions. 173 images of eastern Asia, taken from 1909-1912, have been digitized and are available on VIA.

Arrangement

The Purdom collection is organized in six series:

- Series I: Biographic Material and Portrait of William Purdom
- Series II: Correspondence to Charles Sprague Sargent
- Series III: Correspondence to James Veitch
- Series IV: Correspondence from Charles Sprague Sargent to William Purdom
- Series V: “Technicalities of the Purdom Expedition”
(itinerary and itemized expenses)

Series VI: Images

Container List

Series I: Biographic Material and Portrait of William Purdom

Box 1

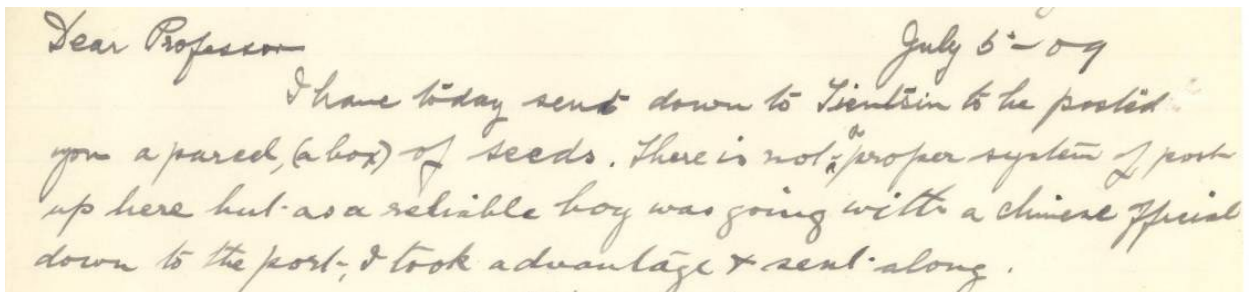
Folder 1. Portrait from *Eaves of the World* by Reginald Farrer. Vol. II, 1917, p. 255. 2 copies.

2. Secondary Reference Materials about William Purdom, assembled by Arnold Arboretum Staff, copied from various publications, including *The Journal of the Arnold Arboretum*.
3. Presant, O.V. *A Perfect Friend: The Life of Cumbrian Plant Hunter William Purdom*. [S.l.] : Hayloft Publishing, 2019.
4. Watt, Alistair, and Seamus O'Brien. *Purdom and Farrer : Plant Hunters on the Eaves of China*. [Place of Publication Not Identified]: Published by the Author, 2019. [HOLLIS](#).
5. Gordon, Francois. *William Purdom : Agitator, Plant-hunter, Forester*. Edinburgh: Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh, 2021. [HOLLIS](#).

Series II: Correspondence to Charles Sprague Sargent

Box 1

- Folder 1.** Aston House, Shanghai (March 26, 1909). WP describes the journey over, and says Wilson lent him \$200 as he was short of money.
2. Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank, Peking (April 1, 1909). Has arrived in Peking, and will call on Mr. Rockhill and Sir John Jordan.
 3. British Legation, Peking, North China (May 2, 1909). Glad to be leaving Peking for Jehol soon; will send some local poplars when he returns to the area. WP went with Col. Anderson to Huailai fu and hopes to return there in autumn to collect.
 4. Jehol (May 11, 1909). Arrived in Jehol after a difficult trip. He has noticed *salix*, poplars, *rhododendron*, *acer*, and oaks. Will collect them on his way down.
 5. Weichang (May 18, 1909). Says Sargent is right; the Imperial Hunting Grounds are becoming devastated. There are stumps of trees but almost no fair-sized ones.
 6. Liangpa-fu (June 18, 1909). Collected *pinus*, *picea*, *larix*, and *tilia*, *betula*, and is sending a box of cones. Mentions *anemone*, a peony, *geranium*. More about local deforestation.



Dear Professor

July 5-09

I have today sent down to Tientsin to be posted
you a parcel (a box) of seeds. There is not a proper system of post
up here but as a reliable boy was going with a Chinese official
down to the post, I took advantage & sent along.

Purdom to Sargent. July 5, 1909

7. Weichang (July 5, 1909). Sent Sargent a box of seeds. Rice growing takes up much of the land, but around the "small huts of the natives" you can

find *ulmus* and poplar. Specimen collecting has gone well but hopefully the same can be said for seeds. The school-master to the Mongol Prince may help him.

8. British Legation, Peking (August 26, 1909). Returned to Peking to get a passport to go to Wutai-Shan. Found some *larix* in Weichang and asked some locals to help him gather seeds. A local map made things easier but he still had difficulty traveling there.
9. British Legation, Peking (September 4, 1909). Sending a statement of expenses, and will be sending *larix* seed shortly.



Abies nephrolepis. September, 1909

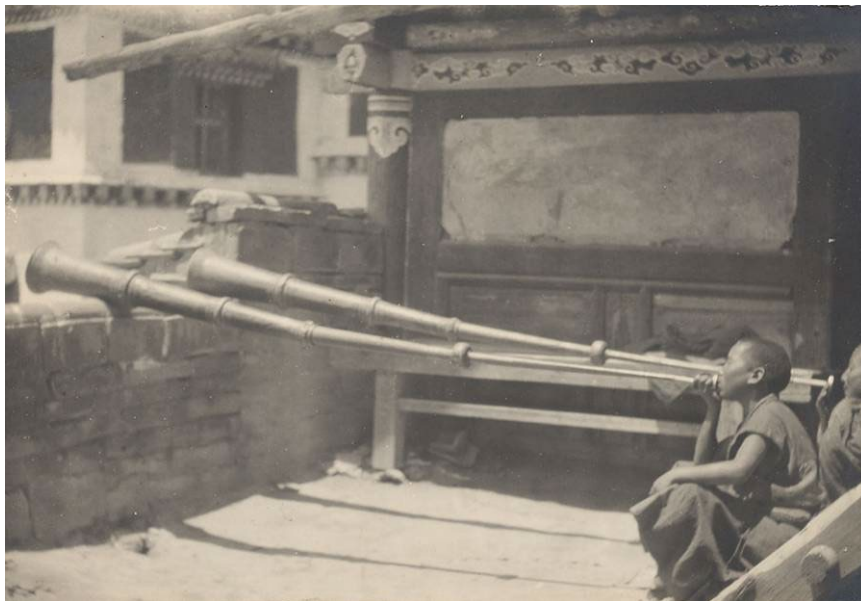
10. British Legation, Peking (September 9, 1909). Trip to Wutai-Shan successful. A missionary in Paotingfu helped him, and after a bare and mountainous journey came to a forest of *larix* and *picea*. Sending seeds, trying to take pictures. Some discussion of expenses and shipping.



Picea Wilsonii. September, 1909

- 11.** British Legation, Peking (January 11, 1910). Returned from Weichang. Poor health near Dolonor, has to cut the letter short to meet with Dr. Morrison.
- 12.** British Legation, Peking (April 3, 1910). A discussion of the best way to travel to Shensi. Wants to avoid the "beaten track." Has sent some oaks to Veitch hoping they get there sooner. Sending photos of Weichang. Has heard of conflict in Lai-yuan-fu and wants to avoid it. His health is fair.
- 13.** Sianfu, Shensi (June 10, 1910). Decided to avoid all other travelers and took a different route from Lai-yuan-fu. Hills are covered with a broad-leaved rose shrub. Saw *abelia*, *pinus*, *viburnum*, and *rhododendron*. Yulinfu is a busy town. Found the moutan near Yeninfu. The road was bad, the people curious but unfriendly. Avoided the main roads and found places full of wild game. Waiting for mules and has encountered Sir Alexander Hosie who is looking for opium, and other foreigners looking for silver.
- 14.** Sianfu, Shensi (June 15, 1910). Sorry to hear some of his material didn't ship well, but is sending more, including moutan, a pear, and others by way of Veitch.
- 15.** Sianfu (August 28, 1910). Back from Tai-pei-shan with a sick interpreter. Local priests blame him for the rain. Has found *betula*, *larix*, *abies*, and ferns. Description of the mountains and musings on where other collectors might have worked.
- 16.** Yeninfu, Shensi (October 30, 1910). People helped gather *pyrus* and moutan; also sending *crataegus* and more *pyrus*. Proposes traveling to Yenchang, Yichwan, and Hancheng Hsien.
- 17.** HBM's Legation? Peking (January 12, 1911). Had a good collecting trip to Shensi despite the rain. The people are friendly but "hindered" him from visiting Taipei Shan. Sending seed packets, *larix* plants, and birch trunk,

- among others. Wants to travel off the main road to Kansu and go via Chohsen "getting onto new ground all the way." Discussion of financials.
18. British Legation (January 22, 1911). Sargent had requested seeds be sent early but it was no easy task for WP in his present circumstances. Sorry to not be trained botanically and hopes he hasn't displeased Sargent.
 19. British Legation (February 18, 1911). Sending Weichang elm cones and wood and is soon on his way from Kansu to Minchow and Minshan. Will change his route if Sargent wishes.
 20. Sianfu (March 21, 1911). On way to Minchow. Apologizes for the amount of moutan seeds but a missionary will collect them for him next year. Discussion of more seeds he has shipped, and what other collectors have collected in the area. The officials are wary of him traveling there but he won't let it deter him.
 21. Minchow, Kansu Province (April 19, 1911). Arrived in Minchow and the weather is cold. The country looks very different and he hopes collecting will go well. Will make contact with a Tibetan scholar, Mr. Christie, in Choni.
 22. Chone, Kansu Province (June 24, 1911). Brief description of the town of Choni. Will travel in the nearby mountains ("wild scenery"); has noticed *meconopsis*, *lonicera*, and *primula*.



Chone Monastery. July, 1911

23. Minchow, Kansu Province (August 5, 1911). Took a trip to the Tibetan border country. Found conifers, *lonicera*, *betula*, *senecio*. Trying to get the good will of the priests so he can travel to Labrang Monastery.



Peling Range Ravine. Fall, 1911

24. 204 Buckingham Palace Rd, London (May 20, 1912). The end of his trip came in a rush, and some of his boxes were lost in a dangerous scrape with brigands, but he succeeded in sending some seeds and live specimens. More seeds will be sent from a missionary friend there. Many of the plants he found had already been found by Wilson. He is also sending photos and maps.
25. 204 Buckingham Palace Rd, London (May 31, 1912). Encloses full statement of expenditures for the trip to China. Will forward a number book of plants.
26. 204 Buckingham Palace Rd, London (June 1, 1912). Encloses prints of *abelia chinensis* and a temple, and has given Veitch film with images of the countryside and people and will send more notes on the trees soon.

Series III: Correspondence to James Veitch

NOTE: Some letters appear to have been copied by Veitch's office, after receipt from Purdom. Many have been transcribed.

Box 1

- Folder 1.** British Legation, Peking N. China (noted as "future address") (April 27, 1909). Sending an *anemone* to V. Passport delayed spending time in Peking looking around and going on a short trip to Nankow Pass with Col. Anderson. Expects to be on his way soon.
2. Weichang (June 5, 1909). WP is after a pink *primula*, a white *anemone*, and peonies. Sending seeds of a blue *anemone*. A paragraph about his personal health, the bad drinking water, and plans for travel further out to the east and north of Weichang.



Chinese strong men. August, 1909

3. British Legation, Peking (September 5, 1909). The trip from Weichang to Jehol rough, and many photographic plates smashed. Sending some more *primula*, and had some trouble, misidentifying one as a geranium. On his way to Wutai Shan for Sargent and then back to Weichang.
4. British Legation, Peking (October 6, 1909). Back from Wutai Shan, where he asked for permission at the temple to collect conifers. Sending some seeds to V as well as to Sargent in case some get lost.
5. British Legation, Peking (Weichang)? (December 22, 1909). Snow has made some travel difficult, but he is sending some *picea* seedlings and some unidentified seeds. Discussion of wild animals and bandits, though the villagers are kind.
6. British Legation, Peking (January 24, 1910). Planning on sending elm and oak grafts. Met with Dr. Morrison. Please send a shutter for the camera, and hopes V received the seeds sent from Jehol.
7. British Legation, Peking (February 21, 1910). Has had a cold. Sent several boxes with grafts and seedlings. Col. Anderson has been very helpful, though his term ends soon. Will be sending more packages soon.
8. British Legation, Peking (April 3, 1910). *Primulas* are flowering; sent conifers and will send more seeds and roots later. Will be exploring Shensi and is considering different routes beyond Tai-yuan-fu, will send updates.
9. Sianfu, Shensi (June 7, 1910). Describes his journey to Sianfu which included "unknown country" with no roads. Sending a box of the most interesting plants. Moutan was found growing wild at the beginning of his trip, but not on Moutan-shan.
10. Sianfu (August 28, 1910). Travails on the Ysingling Range included rain, reluctant coolies, unhappy priests, pilgrims, and officials, and a sick assistant. Collected *primula*, *potentilla*, *betula*.
11. Sianfu (October 13, 1910). Short letter saying he's sending *pyrus*, *cornus*, and is on his way to Yenanku.
12. Sianfu (March 20, 1911). On his way over the Kansu border soon, is sending *staphylea*, *betula*, and wants to know the status of the *stellera*, *trothiea* sent previously.
13. Minchow, Kansu Province (April 19, 1911). Describes journey to Minchow,

cold and barren, though he heard good things about Choni in Tibet and will head there. Some complaints about transportation.

14. ITEM ONE: Minchow, Kansu (May 16, 1911) (**NOTE:** copied on same sheet as the following letter, ITEM TWO). Collecting *primula* becoming familiar with flora around Minchow before he heads to Labrang Monastery in Choni. ITEM TWO: Minchow, Kansu (June 4). Collecting *primula*, *potentilla*, and spending time with missionaries before moving on.
15. Minchow, Kansu Province (December 17, 1911). "Rebellion everywhere" – roads blocked, Kansu in "state of unrest." Waiting for escort out of province and mailing seeds through Turkestan. Also a plant list is included, probably copied in by Veitch's staff.

Nevertheless I hope to pick up in a few days while I'm in dispatching seeds, then I will go and seek the Aesculus and return to the capital to start home. Shensi and Kansu are in a terrible state of anarchy, and hardly a village has escaped being pillaged. The

Purdom to Sargent. March 23, 1912

16. British Legation, Peking (March 23, 1912). Returned safely narrowly escaping the revolution and other brigands. A bit unhealthy and tired but will try to get some *aesculus* nearby for Sargent and return home now that his contract is up.

Series IV: Correspondence from Charles Sprague Sargent to William Purdom

NOTE: These typewritten letters are photocopies from the Charles Sprague Sargent Letter Books. The contents of these letters are primarily responses to Purdom's correspondence detailed in Series I and Series II. See also: [Arnold Arboretum Correspondence Database](#).

Box 1

- Folder 1.** February 8, 1909. Vol. VI, pp. 333-340.
2. July 13, 1909. Vol. VI, p. 460.
 3. August 25, 1909. Vol. VI, p. 500.
 4. September 23, 1909. Vol. VI, p. 517.
 5. November 8, 1909. Vol. VI, p. 554.
 6. December 7, 1909. Vol. VI, p. 590.
 7. May 3, 1910. Vol. VI, pp. 733-734.
 8. July 15, 1910. Vol. VI, p. 819.
 9. July 22, 1910. Vol. VI, p. 842.
 10. December 16, 1910. Vol. VI, pp. 975-976.

Series V: Technicalities of the Purdom Expedition (itinerary and itemized expenses)

Box 1

Folder 1.

Itinerary, 1909-1912.

- March 26, 1909 – Shanghai
- Tiensin (Tianjin Shi)

- April 1, 1909 – arrive Peking
- May 5, 1909 – Leave for Jehol
- May 11, 1909 – Arrives in Jehol (near Great Wall also called Ch'eng-te)(Chengde, Hebei Prov.)
- May 18, 1909 – Arrives in Weichang district (Imperial hunting grounds, devastated area) to base in Chin-tya-shan (Zhuizishan, Hebei Prov.), north 150 mi from Jehol, over a range of hills
- June 5, 1909 – Weichang, Chin-tya-shan, (Zhuizishan, Hebei Prov.)
- June 18, 1909 – In Liang-pu-fu (letter to Sargent), in east Weichang (60 mi from base)
- Last week in June – journeys to East Weichang, Lampafu thence to Cal-ceen -wong
- July 5, 1909 – In base in Chin-tya-shan (letter to Sargent)
- Second week of July (starting in) (about July 12, 1909) – journey to North and West Weichang,
- then back to base to collect seeds and back to Jehol?
- August 1909 (date from photos) - He then traveled further east to Cal-ceen-wong (the residence of a Mongol Prince).
- August 1909 (end) – Peking
- September 6, 1909 – Journeys to Wutai Mtns. (Wutai Shan, Shanxi) south-west of Peking on railroad first to Paoting -fu (Baoding Shi, Hebei Prov.), then by mule to Wutai village ("some twenty-five temples and the place swarming with priests from Tibet and Mongolia") (Wutai, Shanxi Prov.)
- October 6, 1909 – Peking
- To Weichang (Zhuizishan, Hebei Prov.) to pick up seeds that his collectors had gathered
- December 22, 1909 – south of Weichang then to the west of Weichang to avoid bad weather. Spent three days in Dolonor (Duolon or Dolonnur, Inner Mongolia) on return trip.
- January 1910 (about 1/10/1910) – Peking
- February 21, 1910 – Peking
- April 5, 1910 – Starts new expedition to Shensi (Shanxi Sheng) and Shansu (Shaanxi Prov.) heading to
- Taiyuan (Taiyuan Shi, Shanxi Sheng) west to Fenho
- Yulin (Yulin, Shaanxi Sheng, China)
- Suiteh (Suite, Shaanxi Sheng, China)
- Yen'an (Yan'an Shaanxi Sheng, China)
- Hancheng (Hancheng, Shaanxi Sheng, China)
- June 1910 – Sain (Xi'an, Shaanxi Sheng, China)
- June 16, 1910 – Sets out for Tsing-ling (Qinling Shan) mountain range and esp. the peak of Tai-pei (Taibai Shan)
- August? 1910 – assistance sent to village of Meishien (Mei Xian) near mountain
- October 1910 – departs Tao-pei area for Yen'an
- October 1910 – Yen'an
- November 1910-January 1911 – Peking
- February 1911 – leaves for Sian by way of Yen'an
- March 11, 1911 - Sian
- April 11, 1911 – Minchow (Min Xian?, Gansu Prov.) on Tow River (Tao He) (in this letter he says he is leaving in a few days for Choni)
- May 16, 1911 - Still in Minchow
- June 4, 1911 – Still in Minchow
- June 24, 1911 – Choni (Jone, Gansu Prov.) on Tao River

- July 3, 1911 (week of) – journeying out to “high range of snow clad mountains” (Peling range) into Tepo country
- August 5, 1911 – Minchow
- August 7, 1911 - paying a visit to Lo-ta-ni on the road to Siku (Tibetan village in Minchow dist), from there to journey to the high mountains north of Minchow (i.e. Lien-hua-shan, & Lama-ling) then back to Taochow dist. (Hoping to get to Labrang refused entrance to monastery (Xiahe, Gansu Prov.)
- December 17, 1911 – trapped in Minchow, mentions he’d been to the Peling range to collect Larix seeds and it had taken longer than expected (might be talking about above?)
- December 1911-March 1912 – escaping back across China, attacked by brigands near Cheng-chow (Zhengzhou, Henan Prov.)
- March 1912 (middle) – reaches Peking
- April 1912 (30th takes photos) – Journeys out to the Peking plain looking for Aesculus chinensis. He found them at a temple in the Western Hills
- Summer 1912 (?) – return to England

Folder 2.

The object of your mission would be to collect seeds (& where desirable plants) of trees, (including Coniferae) & shrubs, also any plants likely to have a commercial value, such as lilies, Primulas & similar herbaceous plants.

Itemized expenses.

- 2 receipts from Veitch + Sons (1912).

Chinese Paper	8.50
Presents to Chinese Officials	20.35
" " Underlings	8.50
Sleeping Mats	6.50
Escorts down country during Revolution	380.70
Watchmen (night)	56.00
Bribes to Tibetans	16.20
" " Chinese Priests	22.50
Presents to Tibetan Headmen	45.70
" " Moslem "	23.30
Couriers during trouble	43.45
Peking Expenses	532.50
Feeding Escorts' horses during Revolution	165.30
Tai-yuan-fu (fare from Peking)	18.50
Bribe to Moslem soldiers to pass through fighting lines	16.80
Tip to missionary's	2.00
Present to Missionary's children	5.00

Expenditure list. No date

- Expenditures lists. n.d.

Contract for two-year expedition. c1909

- Contract for two-year expedition (c1909).
- "Statement of Expenditure" (1909).
- Bill – International Train (1912).

Series VI: Genera and Views Collections; Images

The Arnold Arboretum retains William Purdom's images in two formats: black and white photographs mounted on boards, and digital images. Prints are interfiled by genera and location within the Arnold Arboretum photographic files located in the Library Reading Room. Of note are Purdom's 173 images of eastern Asia, taken from 1909-1912, which have been digitized and are available on [HOLLIS Images](#).



olvwork270368



olvwork271084



olvwork260267

The Visual Information Access (VIA) system is a union catalog of visual resources at Harvard. It includes information about slides, photographs, objects and artifacts in the university's libraries, museums and archives. To find and display Purdom's photographs of eastern Asia in [HOLLIS Images](#), use search terms *Purdom* and *Eastern Asian Historical Photograph Collections*.