

## Rodney Howard True, First Director of the Morris Arboretum

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Rodney Howard True (1866-1940) was appointed Director of the newly-established Morris Arboretum in February 1933, the year after the University of Pennsylvania inherited the estate of Lydia T. Morris. When True took on the leadership of the Arboretum, he was also serving as Chair of the Department of Botany, Professor of Botany and Director of the University's Botanical Garden.

True brought extensive experience as a plant physiologist to the Arboretum, having led the U.S. Department of Agriculture's plant research division for close to twenty years. During his tenure in Washington D.C. from 1901 to 1920, True conducted a number of investigations that had a profound impact on American agriculture. He investigated the economic possibilities of a variety of plants, like the production of rose oil, mint oil & camphor and the effects of poisonous plants on livestock. In 1906, he supervised experiments in the cultivation of tea in South Carolina which proved to be highly successful and his findings were published in a comprehensive article in the *Review of Reviews*.

While at the USDA, True gained a reputation as a "botanical sleuth," with his detective approach to peculiar cases like which plant was fatal to sheep, why vines grew from building plaster and what caused mold to grow on cigars. His reputation as a problem solver continued during his years at the University and by 1929, he had earned the moniker "the Sherlock Holmes of the plant world."

As the founding Director of the Arboretum, True was responsible for planning dedication events, orienting scientific staff, creating laboratory space at Compton and drafting the initial budget for research, administration and operations, despite not having a steady source of income from the Morris Foundation as yet.

True's address at dedication ceremonies in June 1933 signaled the transformation of a private estate into an institution of great public good. In lay terms, True forecast the ground-breaking work that botanical researchers would carry out at the Arboretum. In fact, four faculty—a geneticist, an ecologist/geologist, a pathologist and a taxonomist—were already conducting research. True acknowledged that their current work spaces at Compton were makeshift but he was confident that in the near future, teams of scientists would conduct projects using the newest methods in “well-equipped laboratories supplied with apparatus and materials.”

One of True's early accomplishments was obtaining financial support for Joseph F. Rock's plant and seed collecting expeditions in China. The Arboretum's share of Rock's collection expanded the Herbarium by 3000 mounted specimens and provided hundreds of seeds for propagation. Two years later, True announced a significant gift from Colonel Robert H. Montgomery in Greenwich, Connecticut, of over 2000 conifers—one of the most extensive collections in the U.S.

During his long career, True authored numerous journal articles, academic papers, reports and book reviews. When he became Director, he took on the role of editor of the *Morris Arboretum Bulletin of the Associates*, writing articles for a broader audience on a wide range of botanical topics like famous trees, origin of the seckle pear and the Michaux oak grove in Fairmount Park.

True retired from teaching with the rank of Emeritus Professor of Botany in 1937 but continued as Director of the Arboretum until 1939. Within a short time, True successfully guided the formation of the Arboretum and established its influence through a working relationship with important botanical gardens in the U.S., Europe and Asia. Thanks to True's foresight, this international alliance continues to facilitate the Arboretum's collaborative research projects.

Learn more:

Everett E. Edwards, “Rodney H. True and His Writings,” *Agricultural History*, Vol. 18, No. 1 (January 1944), 23-34. [Jstor.org](https://www.jstor.org/stable/3526000).

Joseph Schafer, “Rodney Howard True: A Wisconsin Gift to Washington and Philadelphia,” *Wisconsin Magazine of History*, Vol. 24, No. 3 (March 1941), 336-356. [Jstor.org](https://www.jstor.org/stable/4390000).

Rodney H. True, “The Morris Arboretum and Its Future,” *1934 Year Book of the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society*, (1934), 54-59. [Archive.org](https://www.archive.org/details/1934-year-book-of-the-pennsylvania-horticultural-society/page/n54-m0).