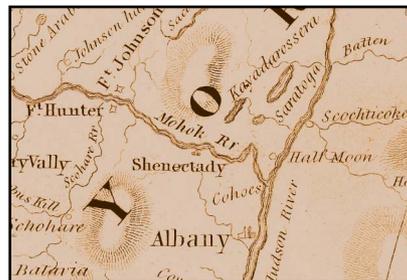


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Pine Hollow Arboretum: An Interview with Pine Hollow Arboretum's John Abbuhl

By Alan Casline and Paul Winkeller

The Pine Hollow Arboretum is located at 16 Maple Avenue in Slingerlands, New York, on twenty-five acres of natural succession Eastern White Pine forest that grew following the abandonment of the land from farming. In 1966, Dr. John Abbuhl started landscaping the grounds using an interesting and unique complex of trees and other plants.

The establishment of plantings within Pine Hollow's ecological system was designed to conserve the natural environment. John's work led to the development of Pine Hollow Arboretum, which was incorporated as a non-profit educational organization in 2007. A biological resource, the land will be preserved for the benefit of members, community, town, watershed, and bio-region. Twelve ponds have been created and over 3,250 plantings. There is an area for Russia and Siberia, a Chinese strip, an Oriental glade, a Japanese hill, and a Western corner and glade. There is a fir trail and a magnolia field and grove. Another grouping is specifically related to the soil type tolerated—the All Purpose Swamp. European and Southern plantings are overlapped.



Autumn walk with John Abbuhl

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Alan: John, the last time I saw you, you were out in your garage with about thirty boxes containing trees. This is the time of the year when Pine Hollow Arboretum is added to?

John: Yes, the fun part is the winter because you look through catalogs. You plan what you want to get for the spring—that's the fun part. Then when the order comes in, the work begins. It starts with opening the box and pulling out the staples. Most of Pine Hollow's material is ordered in gallon containers and there would usually be four containers to a box. Sometimes, when something is only available in a larger size, you pay extra shipping and it arrives in a five gallon container in one box.

Alan: Are you looking at expanding any particular areas of the arboretum and adding to any parts of the collection?

John: When you come across something that you don't have, it takes your interest—as long as it would be viable in this climate under our conditions. Sometimes you try things that are marginal to see if they will make it. I've discovered that many plants listed as even Zone 7, to say nothing about Zone 6, survive perfectly well here in Zone 5. What that means is no one really knows the exact proper Zoning of that particular plant. There are some plants that are found with great genetic diversity—some will die in Zone 6 and others will live in Zone 5.

Paul: Do you have plans to share your collection?

John: One of our ideas is to focus on the material that is reproducible from our trees and other plants, germinating seeds that represent our own material. If a species of fir or spruce was noted to be reproducing, then those seedlings would be distributed. It would be nice to have a small greenhouse to try and germinate material.

Alan: When you started, it seemed you had a real affinity for flowering trees.

John: We have a significant collection of magnolias and we are sprinkled with crabapples. We have an unusual semi-native crabapple—I say that because these particular crabapples are probably seedlings from crabapples planted in the area. They have become native and reproduce in wet clay soil, which is unusual for apples. Apples like well-drained, gravelly soil. Here we have a species that does well, germinates, and reproduces in the wet, producing white flowers, generally, and either red or yellow fruit.

Paul: Wasn't the arboretum started as an extension of landscaping?

John: I think few people would start with the idea they were going to make an arboretum. Pine Hollow Arboretum evolved. There are hobbyists who create arboretums. I am an example of that. The George Landis Arboretum is an example of that. The Garden in the Woods, outside of Boston, is an example of that. I didn't start with the idea I was going to start an arboretum. I started to landscape my home. Then gradually over time I acquired more land—seven and one-half acres—and added that to the original fourteen. I realized I could add enough land and I had enough material so if I planted properly, it could wind up being an arboretum. It was not something that was designed as a five year plan—it was a lifetime plan. This is the forty-seventh growing season of Pine Hollow Arboretum plantings. I moved here in the spring of 1966. I remember a time in the 1970s when I definitely thought I could have an arboretum. It was probably prior to the fact and in the process of acquiring the additional land.

Paul: Pine Hollow Arboretum has an unusually high number of ponds.

John: When I moved here, there were no ponds, but we are in an area of glacial Lake Albany where the clay settled out. It meant that the lake was very still in this area. Fine particles of clay settled out—about one hundred feet thick. In areas like Albany's and Guilderland's Pine Bush, it was sand

that settled out—the water had a little more motion to it and only the larger particles made it to the ground. There are no natural rocks in Pine Hollow. This clay is wet and boggy in the spring, in a hollow—Pine Hollow. It is about thirty to fifty feet lower than the land surrounding it with drainage from a large uphill area. Wet areas in the spring would turn into concrete-hardened clay by August. Certain spots were ideal for excavating, landscaping hilly rises, and creating ponds. There was great care taken to building ponds and landscaping the earth and environment so that its form was natural.

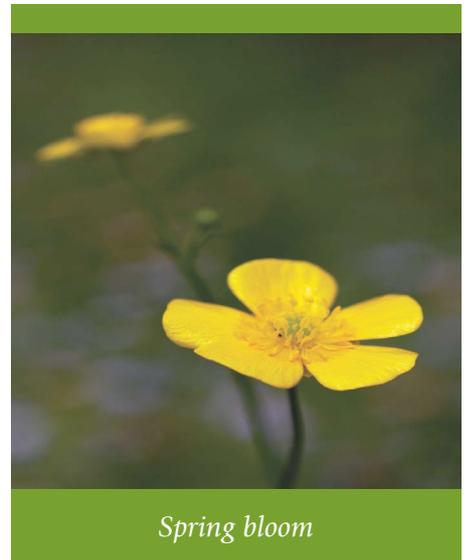
Over the years we have put in twelve ponds, some of them are hardly real ponds, but they are areas with water. Most of them have been stocked with fish of various kinds. They seem to do well. We have nesting ducks, geese, and we are visited by the blue herons. Kingfishers go up and down the pond areas. The streams are seasonal—they dry up—they don't run continually. Pine Hollow Stream all goes out as one stream under New Scotland Road. At the low point going out New Scotland, as you go past the Post Office on the right, in the bottom of the hollow just before you get to Pine Hollow Road, there is a culvert under the road. The water from Pine Hollow runs through and back past an area of new construction and ends at the Normanskill. We are in the Normanskill watershed.

Paul: Are there ebbs and flows of wildlife at Pine Hollow? In the last decade have you noticed any difference from earlier times?

John: In 1966, when the arboretum planting started, there were no deer. I saw the first deer in the middle of the 1970s. Before that my children would come around—they were in grade school, early high school—and they'd say, "Dad! There is a deer hanging in Mr. X's garage!" The deer were being poached on a regular basis back in the 1960s and before. That kept the population under control. The predator was man. When that stopped, hunting was less prominent. In this area you can only hunt deer with bow and arrow. More deer are killed on the highways here than are killed by archers. The deer have learned to live in people's backyards. We have resident deer that are so tame they will not run away from you. They will just stand there and watch you.

Alan: Which tree is your favorite?

John: Well, it is like your children, you don't have a favorite. I have specialized in collecting fir trees, spruce trees, and deciduous conifers. Also there are trees that grow in more southerly locations that can also manage to grow here—such as papaws, persimmons, tulip trees, sweet gums, sourwood—different kinds of trees that classically grow only in the more southerly forest. I plant about a hundred trees every year; some years I've planted more. We are up to just over 3,250 plants. Now, they all have not lived, but that is the number of plantings that are recorded in our records. We have one of every



fir tree and spruce that we have been able to get our hands on and every deciduous conifer along with anything that sounds a little different. It would be hard to name something that might live in this climate that either the arboretum has or has been tried.

Alan: Biologists emphasize the idea of bio-diversity. With climate change happening, how do you see Pine Hollow Arboretum contributing to the world community in terms of a depository for bio-diversity?

John: We try to order things that are rare and endangered. An example would be “Virginia Birch” (*Betula uber*). It grows in the Smyth Valley in Virginia. There are only about seventeen specimens. One planted at Pine Hollow has grown to about twelve feet and now this spring we have another to plant. If we have something rare doing well and have only one, it is a good idea to have more than one. Of course, our philosophy is growing trees in a natural environment. What constitutes natural? It is when you can grow something to its normal proportions and where it can reproduce. One thing that gives us pleasure is to see trees that we planted able to reproduce in the environment in which we planted them. For instance, our *Metasequoia* are now reproducing.

We have maintained the natural flora here. When the farm land was abandoned, a pine forest grew and our pine forest is now undergoing the natural succession that a white pine forest does, being replaced by maple, hickory, elm, ash. There are White Walnuts (*Butternuts*) that are native trees. Maintaining a natural succession could be seen as an aid to bio-diversity. An arboretum is a storehouse of genetic material. How do you get an arboretum? There are six ways—college campuses, cemeteries, old estates, public parks, philanthropists who want an arboretum for their community, and last, the hobbyist or a combination of these ways. Many famous arboretums that started as estates are run by colleges or universities. They have a joint endeavor. One of the most famous public parks is the Golden Gate Park in San Francisco, which is basically an arboretum.



Spectrum Magnolia and apple blossoms

Alan: This is a leading question. Can you tell me when would be a good day to come and visit Pine Hollow Arboretum?

John: Any day the weather is good enough is a good day, and if you live close by, you might even

walk around in bad weather. I tell people when things are blooming, if you don't come every ten days, you are going to miss something.

Pine Hollow Arboretum is open daily to visitors from dawn to dusk. Please call in advance for a guided tour or if there are more than five people in your group. Parking is available at 16 Maple Avenue, Slingerlands, New York, either in the driveway or on the front lawn (weather permitting). You are welcome to tour the arboretum if not a member. Please consider becoming a member and supporting the arboretum. For individuals with a disability or handicap, please call ahead. We can be reached at (518) 439-6472. We hope to see you soon. 🌿



Pink Black Locust

🌿 *John Abbuhl, M.D., is a pediatrician and resident of Slingerlands. Alan Casline and Paul Winkeller are members of Pine Hollow Arboretum's board of directors.*