



# Fathers of Botany: The Discovery of Chinese Plants by European Missionaries

*Jane Kilpatrick*

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Many of the world's most renowned and exciting ornamental plants—including magnolias, roses, rhododendrons, tree peonies, lilies, and blue poppies—have their origins in China. In the mid-nineteenth century, professional plant hunters were dispatched by nurseries and botanic gardens to collect living botanical specimens from China for cultivation in Europe, and it is these adventurers and nurserymen who are often credited with the explosive bloom of Chinese flowers in the West.

But as Jane Kilpatrick shows in *Fathers of Botany*, the first Westerners to come upon and document this bounty were in fact cut from a different cloth: the clergy. Following the Opium Wars, European missionaries were the first explorers to dig further into the Chinese interior and send home evidence of one of the richest and most varied floras ever seen, and it was their discoveries that caused a sensation among Western plantsmen. Both men of faith and talented botanists alike, these missionaries lent their names to many of the plants they discovered, but their own stories disappeared into the leaf litter of history. Drawing on their letters and contemporary accounts, Kilpatrick focuses on the lives of four great French missionary botanists—Pères Armand David (of *Davidia involucrata*—the dove tree—and discoverer of the giant panda), Jean Marie Delavay, Paul Guillaume Farges, and Jean André Soulié—as well as a group of other French priests, Franciscan missionaries, and a single German Protestant pastor who all amassed significant plant collections, as she unearths a lost chapter of botanical history. In so doing, she reminds today's gardeners and botanists—and any of us who stop to smell the roses—of the enormous debt owed to these obscure fathers of botany.

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