

## Homage to Alphonse Lavallée (1836-1881) and an account of the IDS visit to the Arboretum Segrezianum at Saint Sulpice de Favières (France)

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Segrez (from the Latin, 'secretum' meaning a small, secret wood) is situated some 40 kilometres south of Paris on the edge of a village known for its splendid 13th century gothic church. It is tucked away in a picturesque valley with a view over meadows and low wooded hills. The château was built in the 18th century by Mansart de Sagonne for the Marquis d'Argenson, foreign minister under Louis XV, and some *Taxodium distichum* and *Liriodendron tulipifera* still growing in the park date from that period. The arboretum, which at present covers 24 ha, has an abundance of water due to numerous springs which arise in the porous sandstone, but although this is most useful for young plantations the number of varieties which can attain full maturity is limited by the fact that the arboretum is very exposed to strong winds and that there are sometimes periods of intense cold in winter and scorching heat in summer.

Alphonse Lavallée planted his first trees in 1857, but without any real scientific purpose. The following year, thanks to the generosity of his father who gave him the means and the space, he decided to create an arboretum where he wished to assemble ".....all woody shrubs and trees which can thrive in the open in the Paris Region." A note written in 1877 explains how meticulous he was in correctly naming and identifying the plants in his collection: "Having collected and dried good specimens, I forced myself to momentarily forget the name under which they were sent, it is the only way to have an unbiased idea of their identity. As I went along, determining and verifying the names of my plants I realised just how important it was to note the provenance of each as well as the exact date of its introduction to Segrez. I was then led to create a methodical catalogue which enabled me to check all the indications pertaining to each individual, which was in a way its identity card. I then drew a map with a scale of half a centimetre to a metre on which I recorded each species and variety. To make this system complete it was necessary to resort to double labelling; the first reference being temporary and given to the plant on arrival, the second reference being definite and attributed only after thorough verification....It has proved more difficult to keep my plants



Left: *Juglans x segreziensis* at the Arboretum Segrez, France  
 Right: Louis-Mané Picard, son of Franklin Picard, and *Fagus* "Faux de Verzy" at Segrez

thriving and well-ordered than to actually build up the collection. Without rigorous exactitude in each operation and continual checking, without the infinite precaution of making sure that each species is represented by several individuals, it would have been impossible to keep any form or order amongst such a large collection of plants...As I was some distance from any scientific centre I was led to constitute a dendrological library to which I added books on the local flora of countries in the northern hemisphere, general works and more specific botanical and horticultural volumes which gave numerous descriptions of the woody plants in cultivation. I had to make a special herbarium in which each species was represented by a branch with leaves, flowers, seeds, cones etc...I collected wood from each species and preserved the fleshy fruits, which could not be dried, in alcohol. I even had to make an album with drawings of the new introductions or of those which were endangered ....It was only after all this preliminary work that I could, with some degree of assurance, determine the exact nature of my dendrological collection and finally undertake its meticulous verification."

The main plant collection at Segrez was assembled between 1857 and 1884. Alphonse Lavallée (see p.80), who was both pupil and fervent admirer of François Herincq and of Joseph Decaisne, was the first person in France to attempt to create an encyclopaedic collection of trees



Hedwige Roux, and her daughter Gwendelle, the great, great granddaughter of Alphonse Lavallée, by the "Faux de Verzy"

and shrubs. He visited André Leroy's collection in Angers, and went to Kew and to nurseries in Belgium, England, France, Germany and Italy, where he personally chose the plants destined to become part of his collection. He decided that the best way " was to create classes of trees and shrubs to be planted in lines rather than in clumps" (A.L. 1877). After many trials and errors and after comparing it with collections in England, France, Germany and even America, the botanist towards the end of his life was pleased to note that his collection, which numbered approximately 6500 different species " ...included almost all the known species, either indigenous or exotic, which could grow in our climate..."

Alphonse Lavallée was among the first to grow plants from Central Asia, thanks to General Korolkov who sent him, for example, *Populus korolkowii* and *Exochorda korolkowii*. Other famous contributors to the collections at Segrez were Abbé Brunet, Bunge, A. de Candolle, Asa Gray, Sir Joseph Hooker, Maximowicz, Ortgies, Benedict Roetzl, Willkommen, Leichtlin, Heildreich, Radde, Regel and Roth. Lavallée was aware that there were still many plants to be discovered in China, Japan, the Himalayas and the Middle East, but unfortunately before he was able to carry on further with his research he died of a brain haemorrhage at the early age of 48. His widow decided to give the shrubs



Alphonse Lavallée (1836-1881)

which could be transplanted to his close friend Maurice de Vilmorin; some of these original plants can still be found growing at Verrières and Les Barres. For example there are numerous types of *Crataegus* at Les Barres which come from Segrez; these originally had been given by Charles Sargent.

Lavallée was President of the Société Nationale d'Horticulture de France and published numerous articles and books including observations on his collections at Segrez. Among his major works, the following are notable: *Arboretum Segrezianum*, published in 1877, in which are listed the various trees and shrubs cultivated at Segrez, and the five-volume *Icones selectae arborum et fruticum in hortis Segrezianis collectorum* (1880-85), with remarkable colour illustrations and descriptions of the new, rare and unusual species in the garden. These were followed by *Large flowered Clematis* (1884), and papers on *Rosa x odora viridiflora* (1856), *Cornus florida* (1863) and *Catalpa speciosa* (1880).

During the 27 years he devoted to the Arboretum Segrezianum, he was remembered as a man of great kindness and generosity, who always kept Segrez open to famous botanists. For instance, in 1878 all delegates of the Paris international botanical and horticultural congress were welcomed; a happy occasion, when a large tent was pitched near the chateau, this is still discussed by family descendants today.