



The 15-inch-high dwarf genus prunus brought back from China by former President Nixon and confiscated by the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

By Craig Herndon
—The Washington Post

Nixon Tree Confiscated

By Maxine Cheshire

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) has confiscated a rare, miniature fruit tree which former President Richard M. Nixon received as a gift from the People's Republic of China during his visit there last month.

The dwarf genus prunus specimen, believed to be either a flowering cherry or a flowering apricot, is ban-

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ned from the United States as a potential carrier of deadly horticultural viruses.

The tree, about 15 inches high, is now in isolation at the USDA's Plant Introduction and Quarantine Station in Glenn Dale, Md. There it joins five other dwarf evergreens that President Nixon purportedly received from Chairman Mao during his historic first trip to Peking and kept at the White House until his resignation. Then the Ford administration transferred them to Glenn Dale, where they have been held for inspection as carriers of plant diseases of a less dangerous type than the dwarf genus prunus.

The new tree; as well as the earlier

ones, is an example of the little-known Chinese art of pen-tsai, a precursor of the more familiar Japanese bonsai. Almost nothing is known about the tree's value.

Agriculture Department inspectors took the little tree on Nixon's plane when he landed at Los Angeles International Airport on Feb. 29.

The State Department had officially extended "courtesy of port" to the Chinese jetliner transporting the Nixon party. That meant that U.S. Customs officials did not board the plane when it landed, first at Anchorage, Alaska, and then in Los Angeles. There was no inspection of baggage.

The Nixons and their entourage were allowed to fill out routine declaration forms and pay duty on those items.

The USDA quarantine inspector in Anchorage, unlike his counterparts in customs, went on board, past Secret Service and Chinese protocol officials. Visible in the aisles of the plane were several large plants, including a 35-pound lily bush that is not considered any particular threat to the greening of America.

Because Anchorage does not have a plant inspection laboratory, USDA

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agents in Los Angeles were alerted that the Nixons were bringing back the genus prunus.

The tree was seized, sealed in sterile brown paper and plastic and shipped in a wooden crate to Washington via Dulles International Airport. A sanitation certificate in Chinese identifies the tree as a gift, but does not give the identity of the donor, according to the Los Angeles inspector.

If eventually found to be healthy, the tree would wind up at the National Arboretum as part of something officials have dubbed "The Chinese Collection."

The 1972 earlier gift originally included eight miniature trees: four pines, three junipers and one honeysuckle bush.

Agricultural inspectors were not notified by Nixon or any of his White House aides that the trees had been brought into the country until three junipers developed a scale infection that proved to be fatal.

Nixon was so fond of his pent-sai trees that he insisted one be on exhibit at all times in the Oval Office, according to White House horticulturist Irving Williams.

When Nixon's pen-tsais began to do poorly, botanical experts were consulted. A bonsai specialist from Baltimore, Dorothy Warren, was recruited to nurse the trees.

USDA horticulturists also were summoned to treat them. But only five trees survived, and one of them is still not off the critical list. Whether the ailment was foreign or domestic was never diagnosed.

Mrs. Warren said she never discussed the trees with the President, but that his aides said they were gifts from Chairman Mao.

According to Mrs. Warren, the trees were supposed to go to San Clemente the day after Nixon resigned in August, 1974.

Although the 1972 trees were officially the property of the U.S. government under the Foreign Gifts and Decorations Act of 1966, Nixon had never registered them with the White House Gifts Unit.

"After President Nixon resigned," Mrs. Warren recalls, "I called the White House to ask what was going to happen to the trees. I was told he was taking them with him, that they were already being packed to go by plane. Then the next thing I knew, someone called and told me they had ended up at the National Arboretum."

President Ford's legal counsel, Philip Buchen had intervened to prevent any foreign gifts from leaving Washington.

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See also NYP, SFC, 13 Mar 76.