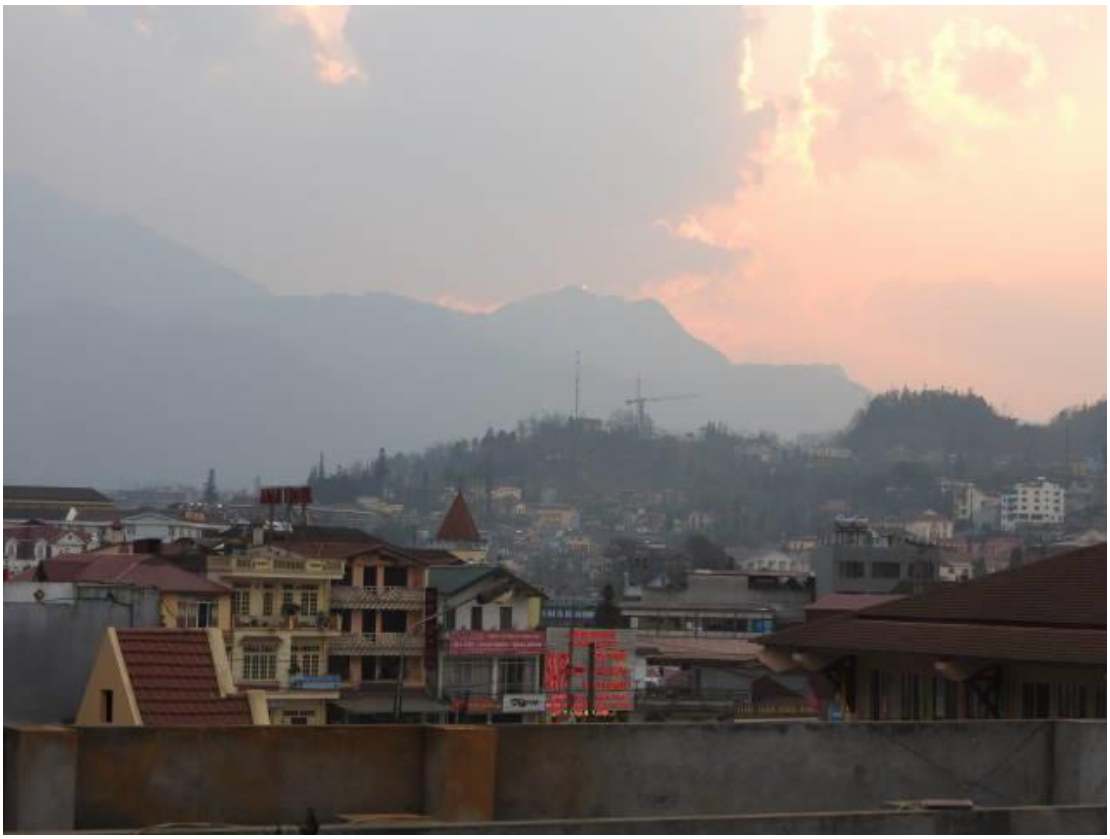
Northern Vietnam March 10-25, 2016



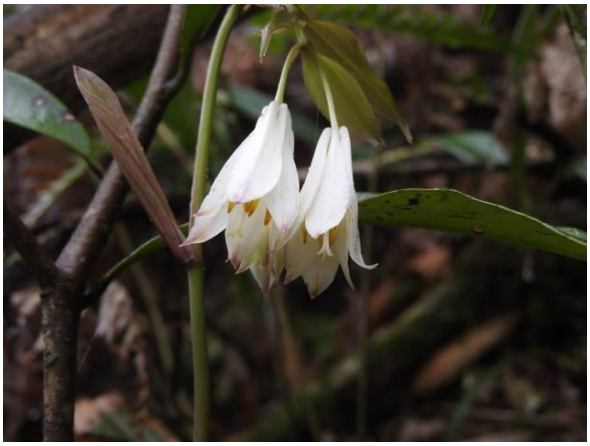
Sapa, Vietnam

We started our trip from the same "small" town we always have, but hardly any of us recognized the place anymore. Sapa is what is known as a frontier township in the province of Lao Cai in northwest Vietnam. There are two main minority groups that settled up in these hill centuries ago…the Hmong and the Yao, with a handful of smaller groups living there now as well. In the late 1800's, the French began to settle in the area, bringing with them their culture, cuisine and architecture. During this time, a thriving mountain town was established only to be nearly destroyed by the end of WWII and really did not start rebuilding until the mid 1960's. Finally, in 1993 the area was re-opened to international tourist and has been growing and building ever since. The last time I had traveled to this area was the fall of 2013 and even in that short amount of time the number of hotels, restaurants, karaoke bars and foot massage parlors has surely quadrupled. On this trip we witnessed tops of mountains being removed and pulverized for gravel as well as the opening of a HUGE 30 passenger cable car which now whisks tourists from town all the way to the top of the highest peak in Indochina (Fan Xi Pan) in just 20 minutes. This place is changing daily…and not necessarily for the better.

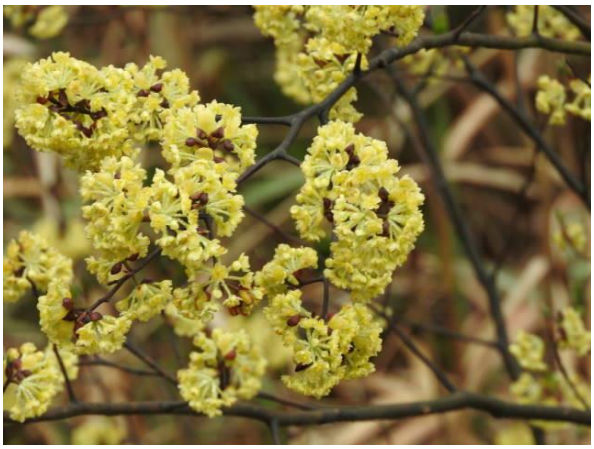
Our core group on this trip was Douglas Justice (Garden Director, University of British Columbia), Andy Hill (Asian Garden Curator, University of British Columbia), Brian White (Royal Roads University, British Columbia, Canada), Dan Hinkley (Director, Heronswood Garden, Seattle, WA) and Scott McMahan (Manager of Plant Exploration, Atlanta Botanical Garden, Atlanta, GA). Our host was Dr. Nguyen Van Du of the Vietnamese Academy of Science and Technology. The main goals of this expedition were to attempt to help locate and identify species of Rhododendron and Magnolia while in bloom (as well as the wealth of companion plants in the vicinity) on Fan Xi Pan mountain, a rich area northwest of Sapa called Y-Yt and the Bai Dot Son area in Ha Giang province in the northeastern part of the country.

Fan Xi Pan (10,312')

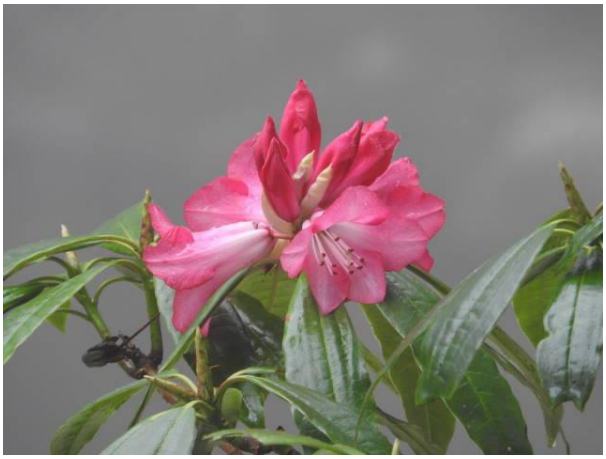
None of us had been to this area in the spring before, so we were unsure exactly what to expect once we arrived. Our lack of experience at this time of year coupled with the fact that northern Vietnam suffered a severe 2015-16 winter with major ice and snow accumulations did have us arriving a bit early to see some of the higher elevation plants in flower, but just down from the peak plants were in full spring swing.

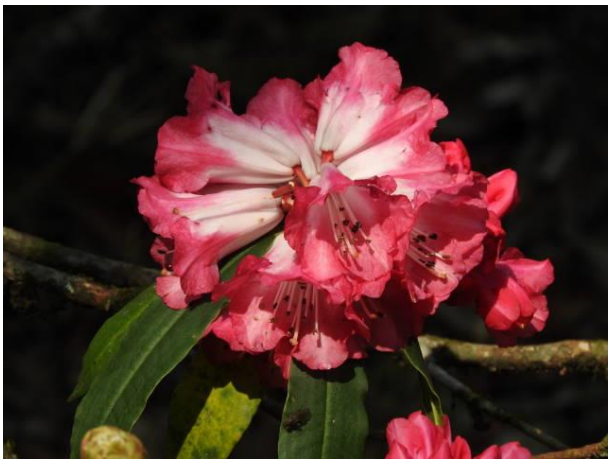


Disporum sp.

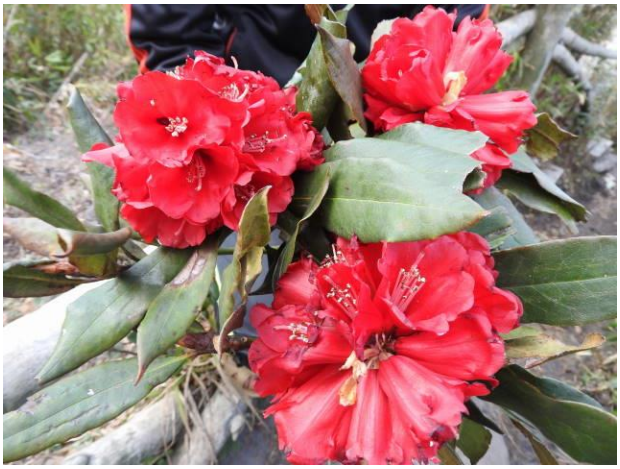


Lindera sp.

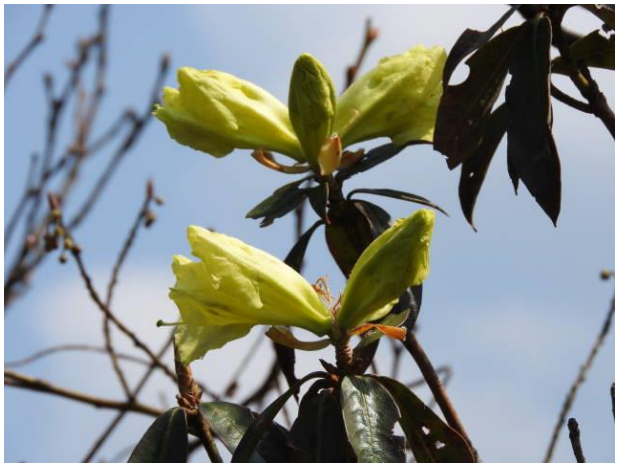




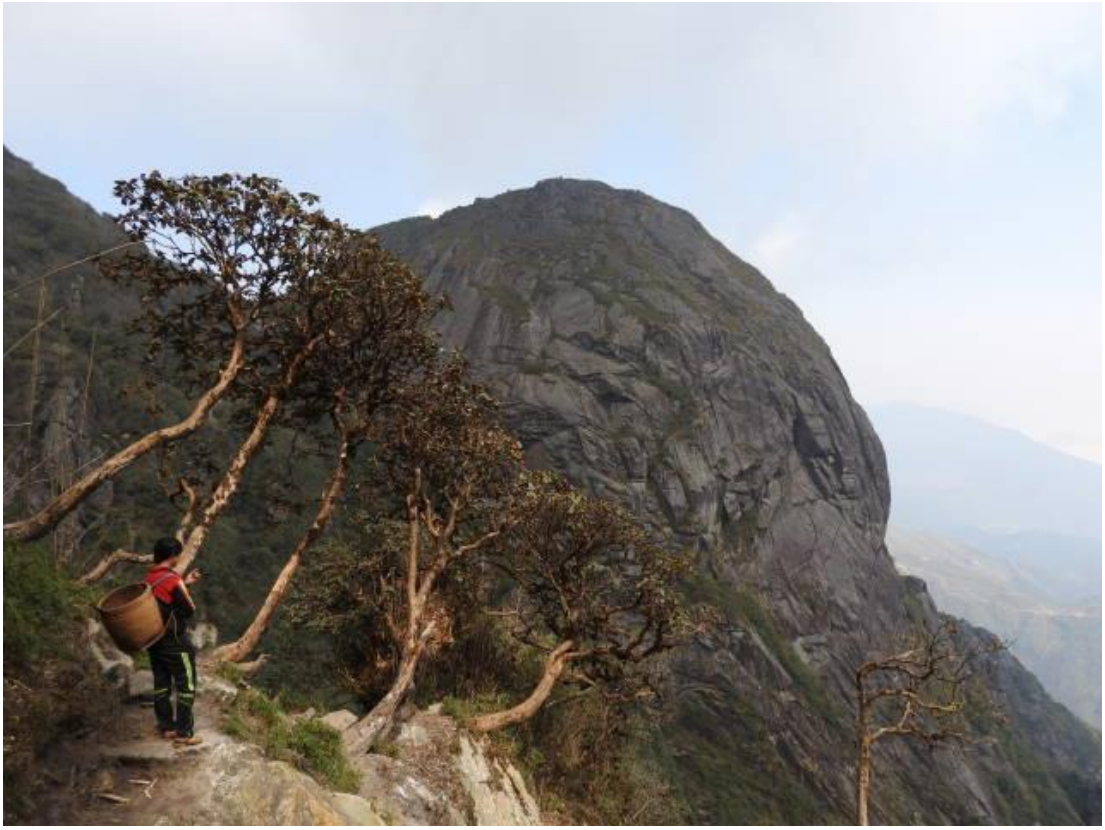
Rhododendron sp. (New / Unidentified species, above)



Rhododendron tanastylum



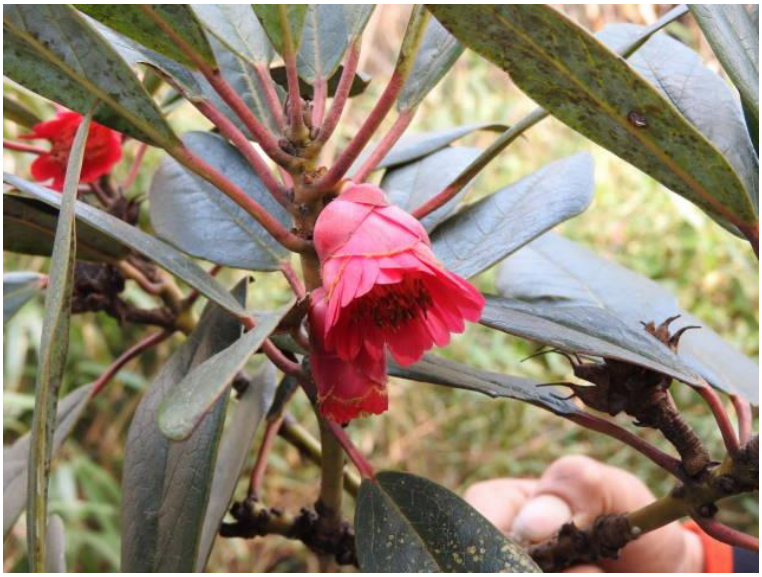
Rhododendron leptocladon



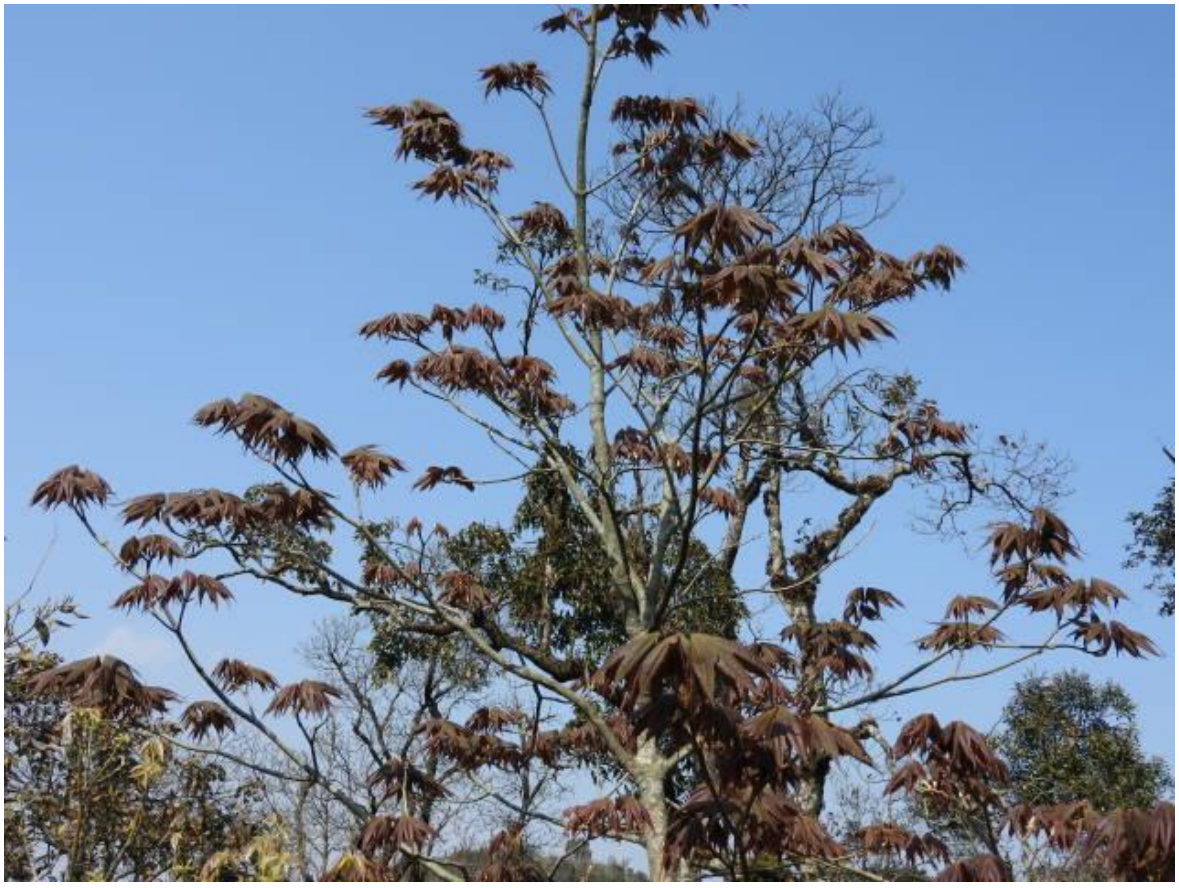
Porter on the way down from the top of Fan Xi Pan.

While the Rhododendrons were certainly stunning, the woody companion plants we found growing along side them were equally interesting. Plants such as Rhodoleia, Illiciums, evergreen Magnolias and multiple species of Acer were abundant along the trail.

Illicium sp.



Rhodoleia aff. parvipetala (flower and seed pod)

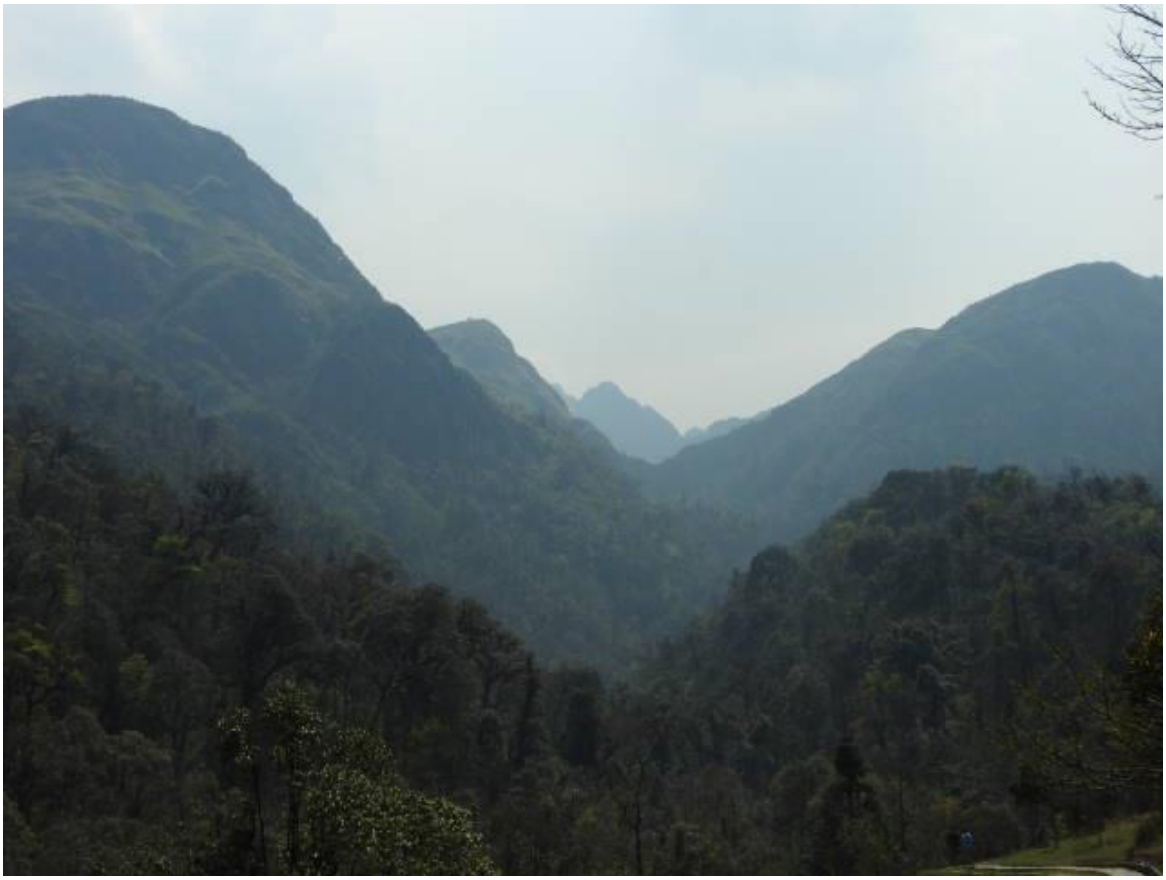


The nearly black new growth of Acer heptaphlebium

Leafless Magnolia sapaensis

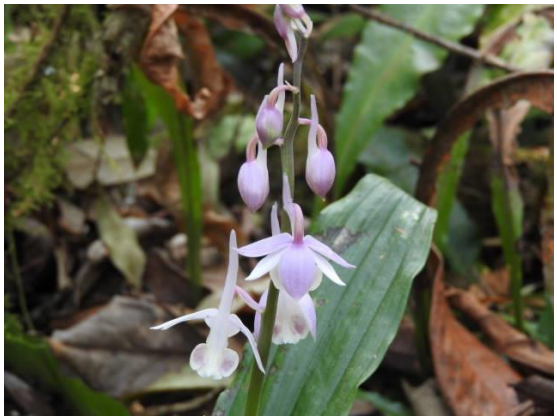
An interesting observation that was made about some of the typically evergreen tree species growing on the mountain was that due to the unusually harsh winter, many evergreen plants responded by becoming deciduous. They didn't appear to have lost any vegetative tissue (the coming seasons flower and leaf buds still intact), but were completely bare as an adaptation to the cold temperatures. I suppose this give us hope that some of the plants that live between that temperate and tropical boundary can survive short dips into frigid temperatures and still come back to life.

While there, we also explored an area on the northern side of Fan Xi Pan called Tram Ton Pass (a.k.a. Heaven's Gate). This area was slightly lower in elevation and provided us with a different set of plants to evaluate all together. Here we encountered more diversity in the actively growing herbaceous flora as well as a few new woodies. Plants such as Disporm, Polygonatum, Aspidistra and Calanthes were found growing with Illiciums, Acers, Hydrangeas, Rhododendrons and Rehderodendrons.



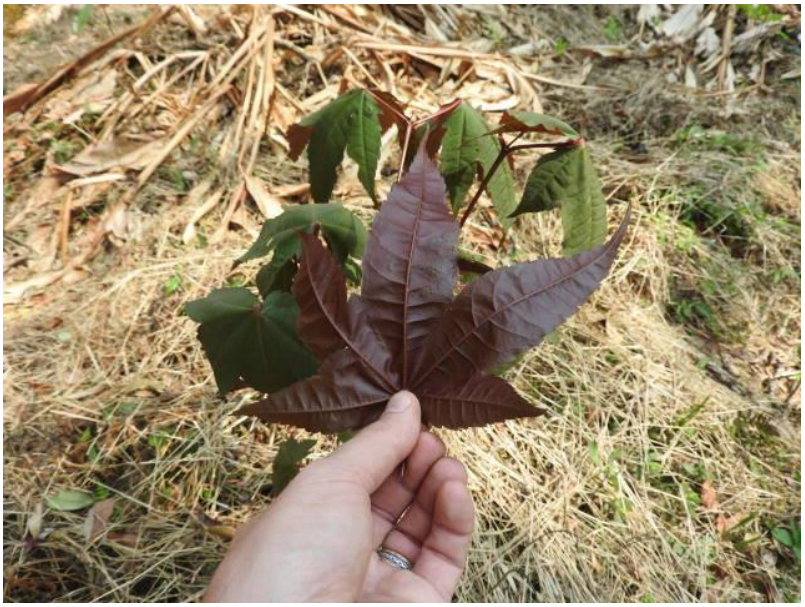
Tram Ton Pass

Holboellia sp.



Calanthe sp.

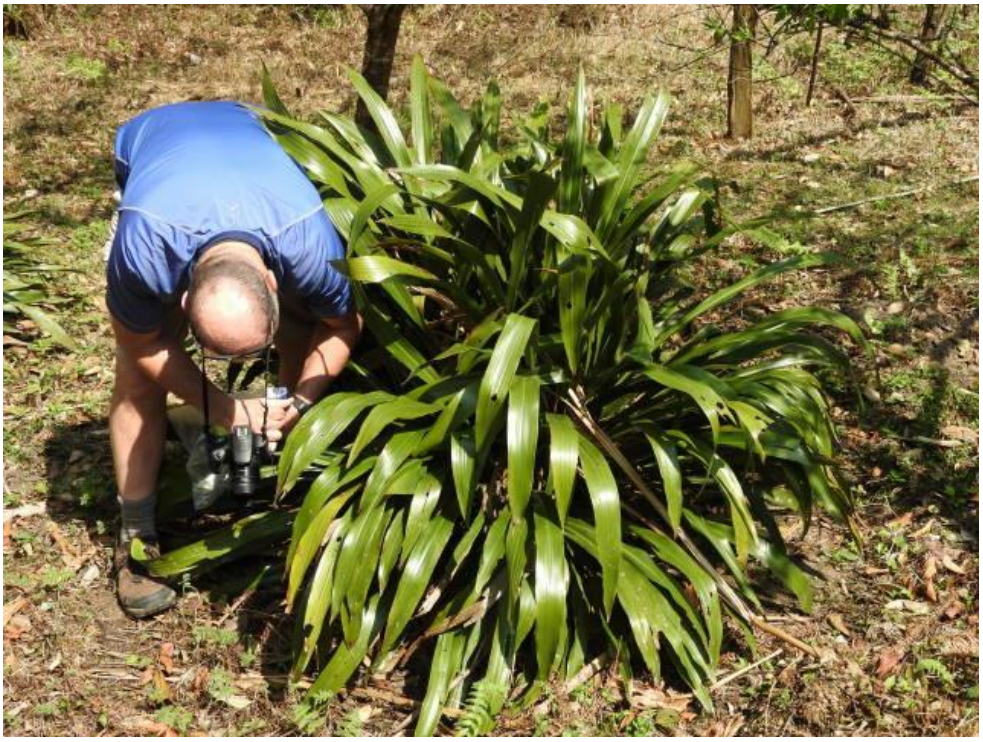
New growth and flowers of Acer aff. fabri.



Underside of juvenile new growth on Acer heptaphlebium.

The jungle floor of Tram Ton Pass seemingly denuded after a harsh winter killed the Cardamom to the ground. Sadly, at least for us plant lovers, the Cardamom will come back and begin eating away at the diversity that is trying to regain a foothold growing at the bases of these huge trees.

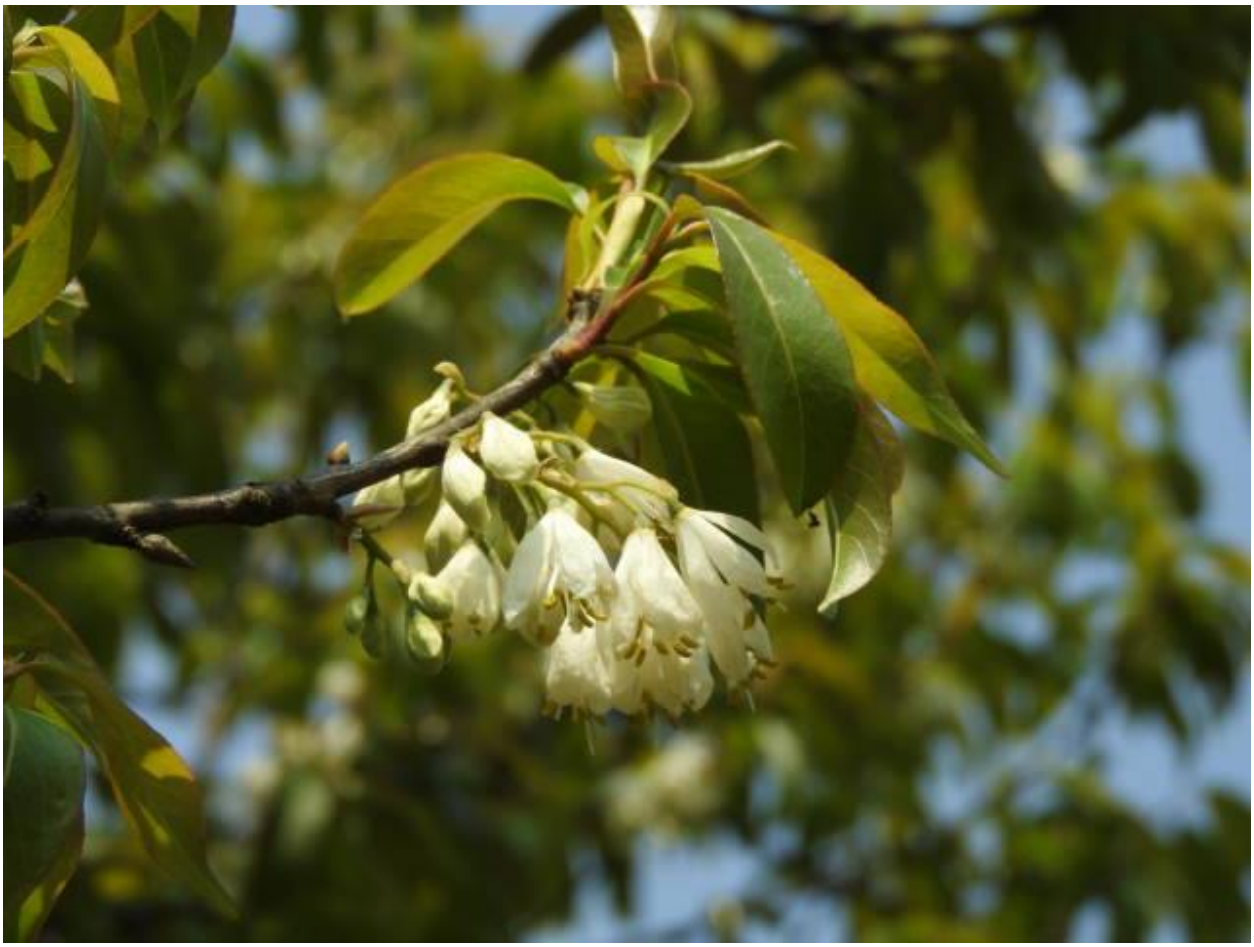
Polygonatum aff. mengtzense



Dan Hinkley collecting seed of this giant clump of Aspidistra sp.

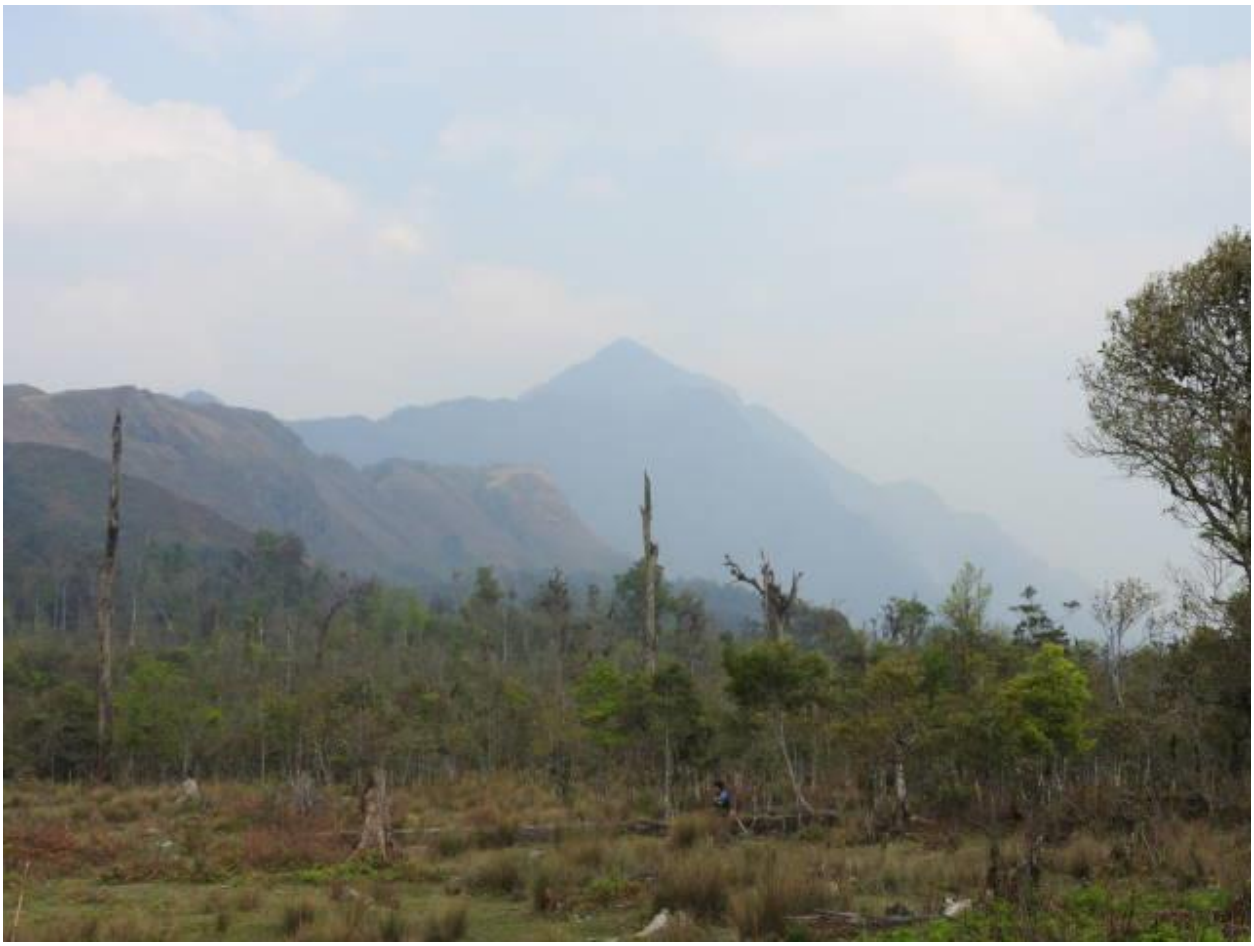
Illicium sp. coming into flower. These plants were so covered in buds and very small reddish / pink flowers, from a distance we were sure they were a species of Ilex loaded with berries.

Rhododendron moulmainense. Deep pink in bud, light pink in flower with exquisite fragrance.



Rehderodendron macrocarpum. Very large examples of this tree towered overhead all over the pass. In the fall, the ground is littered with seed pods resembling pecans (only about 3 times as large).

Part II: Y-Ty



The rich, swampy lowlands that are found at the base of the mountains in Y-Ty. In the distance…Yunnan, China.

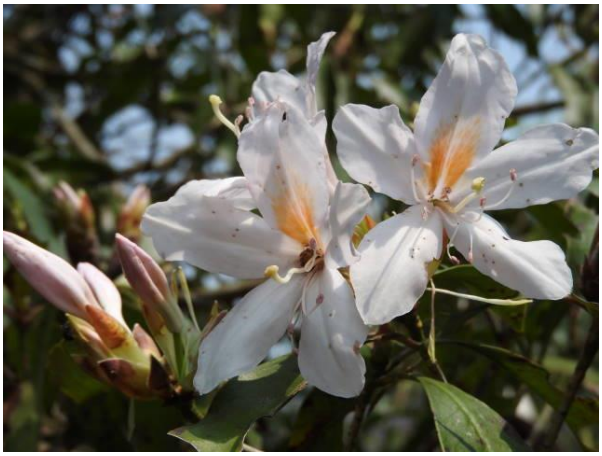
After wasting two full days driving to the northeast province of Ha Giang, then being turned around by the local authorities, we decided to retreat to a spot we had been fascinated with on recent trips very near the Chinese border called Y-Ty. In the past, this area has taken us more than a full day driving on very bad "roads" complete with washouts and bottomless potholes. However, these days it only takes about 2 ½ hours to travel from Sapa to Y-Ty via a mostly paved roadway traveling through one mountain village after another. While much of northern Vietnam is suffering, not only from a harsh winter, but also an extreme drought, Y-Ty was not. The cold certainly reached this part of the country but the lowlands were nearly flooded, which is exactly how I remembered them in the past. Because of all of the moisture in the area, the plants seemed to be thriving and advancing towards spring.

While the Cardamom in this area was also killed to the ground in most places, spring ephemerals were already popping up through the brown foliage. We came across beautifully mottled Arisaemas, a species of Paris in bud sanding 4' tall, sprawling Asarums, flowering Disporums and Stauntonia vines pushing iridescent purple new growth…all nearly being choked out by cultivated Cardamom. What these jungles would look like without the influence of Cardamom became the topic of many of our discussions. Once growing opium was made illegal in these remote areas, Cardamom became the cash crop of choice and is now the scourge of the jungle.

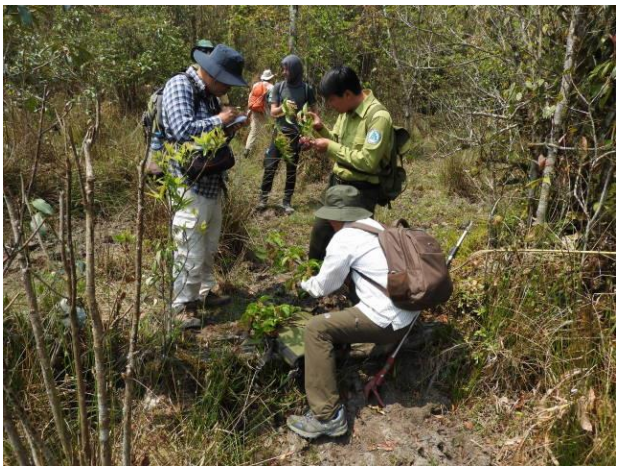
Arisaema sp.

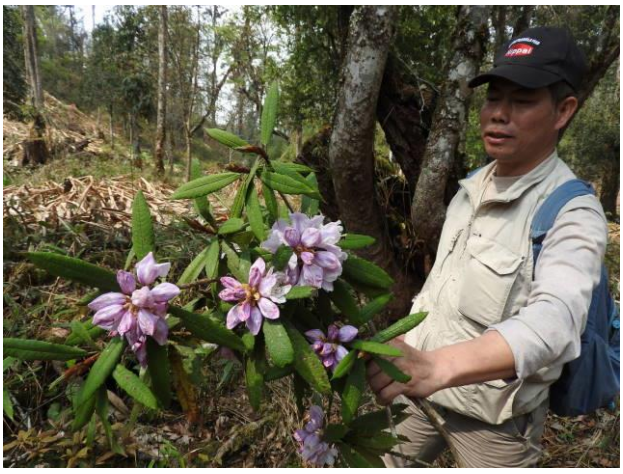
Paris sp.

Stauntonia sp.



Rhododendron moulmainense flower and new growth.



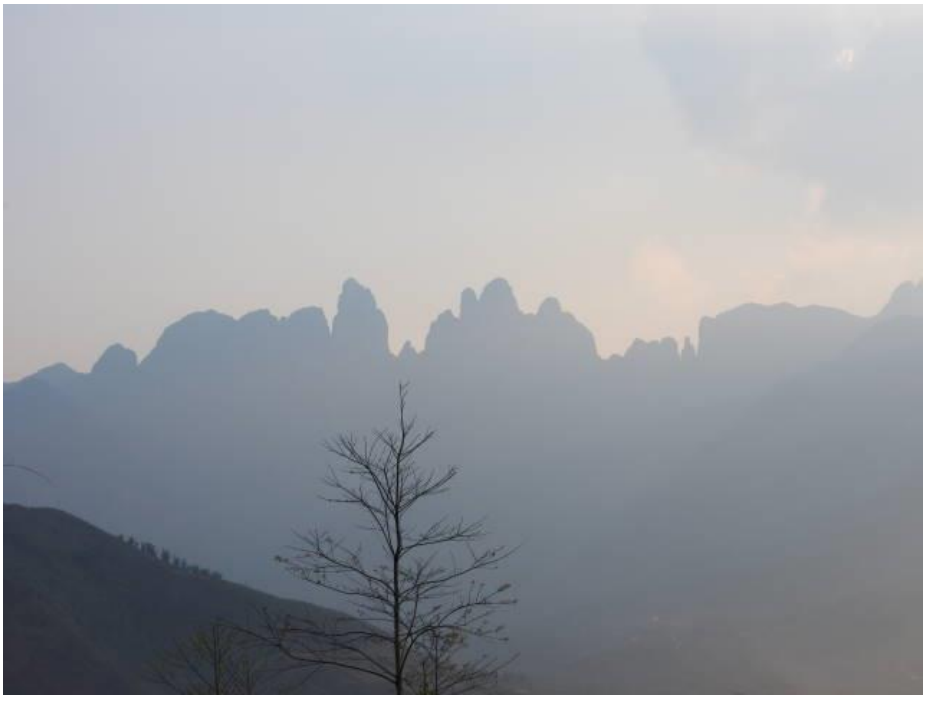


Vietnamese Academy of Science scientists collecting and preparing specimens for pressing.

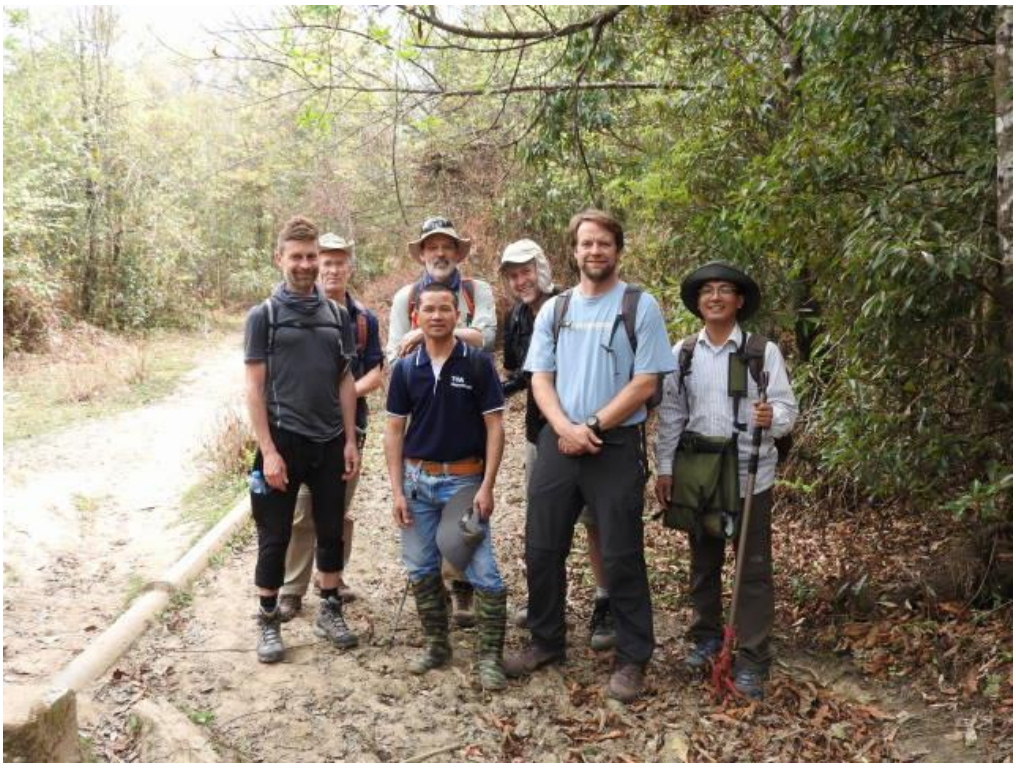

Uoc Le Huu standing with the genus named after him (and Peter Wharton), Uocodendron whartonii.

Disporum aff. trabeculatum (above)

Enkianthus sp.



Glimpse of Five Fingers Mountains on the way back to Sapa.



The Crew: Andy Hill, Douglas Justice, Uoc Le Huu, Dan Hinkley, Scott McMahan, scientist from Vietnamese Academy of Science.

Northern Vietnam is home to an amazingly diverse plant community, but it also currently experiencing very rapid growth. Joint expeditions like this between botanical institutions and local scientific / forestry departments are important in trying to observe and preserve the threatened flora of these jungles.