2025 Vietnam Fall Trip Report: October 26 - November 11, 2026

Thanh Trinh with *Kadsura coccinea* fruit

This past autumn, I (Tim Marchlik) had the opportunity to represent the Atlanta Botanical Garden (ABG) on our latest trip to Vietnam. This took place in late October to early November 2025. George Guenthner, an ex-ABG employee who now works at the U.S. Botanic Garden in Washington D.C., was supposed to join me as well. However, due to the government shutdown and George being a federal employee, he was unable to join myself and our Vietnamese colleagues. The team from the Vietnamese Institute of Biology consisted of Dr. Dzu Van Nguyen, Binh Tranh, and Thanh Trinh. The goal of this trip was to check back on the Magnolia sonlaensis population that we found in April, further explore the Tram Tau area, and re-visit the commune of Y Ty in Lao Cai.

I flew out of Atlanta on October 25th, 2025 and arrived in Hanoi the following evening. After a restless night's sleep, we packed our gear into the VAST-owned van and left Hanoi for the mountains. Our first stop was the Yen Chau district in Son La province. We had visited this same area previously in the spring of 2025. In April we found the type-specimen trees of Magnolia sonlaensis. This was the result of a multi-year search to find the small population. We saw evidence of the tree flowering and fruiting in spring (our Vietnamese colleagues were able to dig a couple seedlings to grow at their Biodiversity Station in Hanoi), so we decided to check back for seed. This species was only described back in 2020, and there has been very little ex-situ conservation effort as of yet.

We arrived in Son La the evening of 10/27, and had a small dinner before heading to bed for the night. The next morning we walked to a local restaurant for a noodle soup (pho) breakfast, then got in the van to drive a couple of hours to a nearby valley. We met up with the local forestry officers and after some tea, a few rangers decided to join us for the day. The local farmers were in the middle of harvesting their rice, and we were able to observe the process while we waited for the rangers to get ready. After a quick motor-bike ride up the valley, and a quick walk through the jungle, we found the Magnolia sonlaensis trees easily using our GPS coordinates from our previous trip.

The large trees had produced many seed pods this year, however we seemed to be a bit late. Most of the seed pods had ripened over a month earlier, and most of them had dropped to the ground and become infested with insects. However, we were able to scrounge up a handful of seemingly viable seeds from pods that were still on the tree.

In the same area we also found a few other plants of interest. A Viburnum was growing directly beneath the Magnolia tree, and had a great seed set. There was a beautiful Angiopteris-type fern, as well as an attractive Zingiber with a red inflorescence that looked like it was about to burst open . This area is at the edge of a commune, which lies near a more dense jungle with steeper mountains towards the Laotian border. The area could merit further exploration, however, it lies at a low elevation (about 900m), which is typically lower than our target range for hardiness. But it will be worth it to monitor the Magnolia sonlaensis population in the future.

Magnolia sonlaensis **seed pod**

Zingiber sp. **In bloom**

Rice harvesting in progress

Viburnum sp.

The next day we were back in the van and headed to the town of Tram Tau in the former Yen Bai province (now combined with Lao Cai). We visited Tram Tau in the spring of 2025 as well, which is near a mountain area called Phu Luong, one of the highest peaks in the area (just shy of 3000m). We had previously found about 4 or 5 different species of Magnolia growing along a single day's trek, and figured it would be worthwhile to check for seeds in the fall.

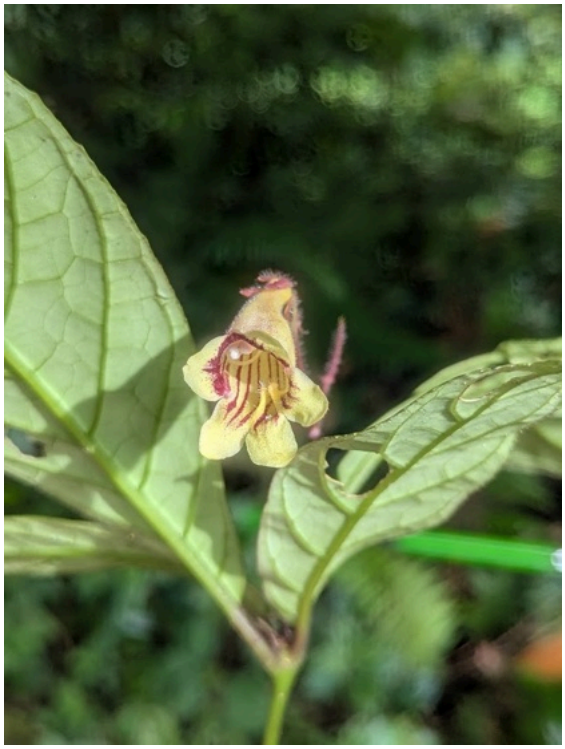
Our original plan was to camp out in the area, but after reviewing maps and satellite images of the forest surrounding the camping route we decided against it. Much of the jungle along that route had been clear-cut and did not show much promise in terms of diversity and large trees. We went back to the same trail we took in the spring, out of the Xa Ho Commune.

We hiked up past a lead-processing facility which marks the edge of the jungle on this side of the valley. At the start of the hike up into the jungle, we found a climbing hydrangea in perfect condition to collect viable seed. We had seen this same plant in the spring when it was in bud and about to flower. It's close to the road and agricultural commune in that area, so we thought it would be good to collect it since it might be cut down in the future if the local villagers decide to cut the tree for agricultural needs.

From the start of this trail, we hiked further up into the jungle which was quite lush due to the rains and typhoons that had swept through the area in recent months. Many gesneriads, such as Henckelia, Paraboea, Loxostigma, Briggsia, and others were blooming in a wide range of colors. Alpinia with bright red fruit lined either side of the trail, as well as large Angiopteris-like ferns. Begonias of a few different species, including Begonia hemsleyana were hiding among the understory. A vine, originally suspected to be a Holboellia but now identified as possibly

Stauntonia leucantha, was rambling over evergreen shrubs along the trail. Luckily some of its golden colored fruit were maturing on the vine and we were able to collect a few. Among these plants there were also Arisaema pingbianense, Tetracentron sinense, Amentotaxus and Hedychium.

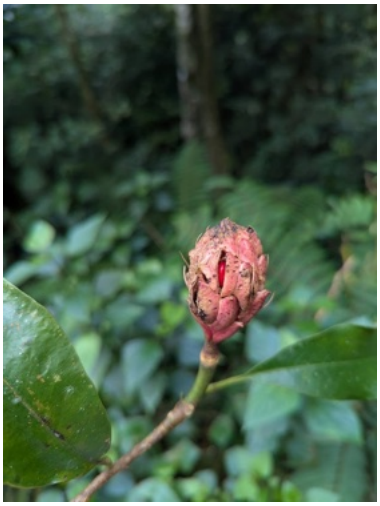
We stopped for a seemingly meager lunch around noon which consisted of sticky rice and crushed peanuts. After gulping down our food, we immediately came across a Magnolia with mature seed pods. The pods were about 30 feet high in the tree, so one of our local forestry guides scrambled up the tree with ease and cut some down. We hiked further up the trail for another hour or so then turned around to return to our homestay.



Loxostigma sp.

Loxostigma sp.

Angiopteris sp.



Magnolia sp.

Briggsia sp.

Alpinia sp.

When we returned to the hotel around 3pm, we gathered our collections to start processing them. Processing the plants involves recording the data for the collections, cutting off foliage/unwanted parts of the plant, and making sure it's clean of all soil and potential pests. Then the plants have to be packed in bags with sphagnum moss and the proper labeling. At the same time, we also have to work on cleaning seeds which can take longer than just washing the plants. Some seeds have to be soaked in water for a few days to soften pulp, while others might have to be wiped clean which can be quite time consuming. The seeds then need to be weighed and bagged for export as well. With myself being the only westerner on this trip, I spent my time in the late-afternoon and evenings working on processing the collections to avoid a backlog at the end of the trip.

Processing collections in the field

Later that evening we walked down the road from our homestay and ate at a local restaurant with one of the Vietnamese forestry rangers. There was a usual spread of assorted meats and vegetables, as well as fried wasp larvae from some local bee hives. During the course of the meal, the ranger mentioned we could explore the other side of the valley that we were in. This area backs up to the Ta Xua Nature Reserve which we had explored previously but from a different approach on the other side of the mountain range. The Ta Xua area has a rich diversity of Magnolias and many other plants so we were interested to see what the other side of the mountain had to offer!

The next day we woke up to heavy fog and light rain. Our plan was to head up to the “back-side” of Ta Xua that we had discussed with the ranger, but getting up there took longer than expected due to landslides across the roads from the recent heavy rain. We reached a bend in the road and our driver pulled over to let us out into the misty fog. Almost immediately we started hiking down a near-vertical path that descended quickly into the jungle. We climbed down to a stream and navigated across it slowly to the other side, where the trail started to climb up a steep cliff. While searching for handholds we found a beautiful Selaginella with bronze new growth. There was Alpinia in seed, as well as some very interesting Tectaria-type ferns.

After climbing up a couple hundred feet, the trail leveled out along a small ridge. The rain made it very difficult to move along the trail, and eventually we found some large Magnolia trees that the ranger had talked about the previous night. Sadly, there was no seed available on these trees. After a bumper seed crop in 2024, it seemed that most of the Magnolias in the area were taking the year off from producing seed. The rain was getting worse by this point and we decided to turn around to head back to the van. On the way back up the other side of the stream, we found an Aristolochia in bud that we had seen flowering in Ta Xua the previous trip. We were able to dig pieces of the rhizome/runner to collect for both ABG and the VAST Biodiversity Station.

Upon returning to the van we drove a short distance further up the mountain road and started climbing up another trail. Our local guides claimed there were large Magnolia trees further up the trail which became increasingly difficult to navigate in the building rain. A bright green pit viper was coiled up on a piece of bamboo close to the trail. We had to carefully work our way around it to avoid disturbing it in the rain. The trail worked its way through small agricultural plots and eventually we had to turn back as it began to rain harder once again. We had found a few of the trees the locals had talked about, but they were not bearing seed as well like the others. Our team made its way back to the van and we called it a day as the rain was only getting worse. We returned to the hotel for a quick sticky rice lunch, then got to work processing the few collections from the day.

***Tremeresurus* Pit Viper**

Muddy trekking conditions

Thanh with a Cymbidium orchid

Aristolochia aff. petelotii

***Alpinia sp.* Seed**

The next morning, on November 1st, we decided to head back to the back-side of Ta Xua but look for a trail at a much higher elevation. Luckily the local guides knew of another trail that started towards the top of one of the passes. The fog and rain was even worse than the previous day, but we were determined to make the best of our time in the field. We rode in the van to one of the top passes, and headed off into the spitting rain. We quickly found ourselves in a diverse and rich forest that did not seem to be used for agricultural purposes. The trail was flooding and we had to walk on wooden planks for many parts of it, but despite our best efforts we were quickly soaked from head to toe. Thankfully we found a Magnolia in seed with bright orange seed, and soon after came across a Kadsura coccinea vine in full fruit. A large Ilex was found nearby with large bright red fruit. There were Illicium growing in the understory which were heavy with seed pods as well, many at the perfect point of maturation. Arisaema decipiens were in flower, growing in clumps alongside the puddles of the trail. Towards the end of the trail we

came across a rosette-type Primulina with small black and white flowers. This trail made for good collecting and our pace slowed down as we found more and more. It was raining too hard to eat on the trail, and we found ourselves deep in the jungle much past lunch time. With the rain not letting up we decided to head back to the hotel to dry off and process the collections from the day.

***Kadsura aff. coccinea* fruit**

Arisaema decipiens

This concluded our time in Tram Tau, and next on our agenda was Y Ty. Y Ty is a commune in northern Lao Cai province near the Chinese border. Due to its proximity to the border many foreigners are not allowed to stay in the town, and are limited in their access to the jungle and trails there. Luckily we had sought prior approval from the local council and with it being just one American they made an exception, and let me stay at one of the few hotels in town. Scott McMahan, Ozzie Johnson and Dan Hinkley used to explore in this area, but Scott hasn't been back since 2016. We figured it was worth checking out to see if the area was still as diverse as it used to be.

We arrived in Y Ty after a 6 hour ride in the van from Tram Tau. The air was thick with fog and quite chilly. We ate a hot pot dinner at a local restaurant, and turned in early for the night. In the morning we had a quick breakfast of beef pho and got our gear together for the day. Our first stop was a known population of Bretschneidera sinensis. This particular population is known for its pink flowers, varying from the usual white. Sadly, most of the trees that produced seed pods had dropped them weeks before. We were able to find some empty pods that critters had gotten to, but no viable seed was to be found. Thankfully there was another area close by to explore; the property of one of our local guides who operates a small homestay.

This small patch of forest proved to be quite fruitful for collecting. The owner of the homestay has cattle which graze around the property making it easy to navigate among the trees. Within minutes of arriving at the property we came across a Magnolia with many seeds starting to ripen. We were able to easily collect these and nearby there was a Euonymus with pink seed capsules, Aristolochia vines twining through the trees, and an Ilex with tiny fruit the size of pin-heads. Throughout the understory Asarum petelotii were growing with varying degrees of variation and leaf shape. There were rosette-type Briggsia nestled among the piles of rocks that scattered the forest floor. Most interesting of all were two great collections. One was a large-leaf Rhododendron with large seed pods. The leaves were thick and leathery with deep veins. The other interesting collection was a Camellia bearing fruit the size of grapefruits. The seeds are typical Camellia size but the fruits are quite puzzling. Camellia experts in the USA and our Vietnamese colleagues were all stumped by the possible species.

After a collecting frenzy across the property, things started to slow down. We found a population of Magnolia foveolata, but sadly they weren't producing the seeds at that time. We also stumbled upon another Stauntonia leucantha vine with large fruits. We collected these as a different population than the one in Tram Tau. There is a possibility that the Y Ty collection will have better winter hardiness given it grows in a colder climate.

We brought all our collections back to the house of the homestay and divided up the seed and plants amongst ourselves. After busily sorting through things we had another lunch of sticky rice accompanied by some homemade Tetrastigma wine that our host graciously offered us. The fog and rain were moving in more heavily following lunch so we went back to the hotel to clean and process the collections from the day. We once again had a hot pot dinner at the same restaurant as the night before, and shortly after we turned in for the night.

Stauntonia leucantha

Euonymus sp.

***Camellia sp.* (huge fruit)**

Rhaphidophora sp.

***Rhododendron sp.* (large leaf)**

Bretschneidera sinensis

For our final day in the field, we gained permission from the local authorities to hike up what is known as the “Water-Pipe Trail”. As per the name, this is a trail that follows a water pipe up a mountain outside the commune. The water pipe starts at a fish farm and winds its way up through the jungle where there are many streams that criss-cross the trail. Our colleague Binh had come down with Dengue Fever and was in the infirmary for the day, and Dr. Dzu had a couple meetings with the local authorities about future work. It ended up being Thanh, our local homestay guide, and myself for the trekking.

The weather was once again foggy and rainy, but we managed our way through the muddy start of the trail at the fish farm, which thankfully became more stable as we reached the forest. Scott had told me that Disanthus ovatifolius (Uocodendron whartonii) grew at the start of the trail, and

almost immediately after starting our trek we found the trees in seed. Thankfully most of the pods had not opened yet and we were able to collect some to dry down. If the pods had opened the seeds would have been flung far away, like other members of the Witch Hazel family do.

Further up the trail we came across another Euonymus with pink seed pods and bright pink seeds, growing as a small tree in the understory. A dwarf epiphytic rhododendron was in seed as well. We had seen this species on previous expeditions and knew it for its small bright yellow flowers. There were many large Magnolias growing in this area but most were not in seed. Those that were in seed were too large to cut any down for the most part. Small purple foliaged Briggsia were dotting the sides of the trail which we were able to scoop up as we crept along the narrow parth.

Towards the middle of the trek we came across a Lilium growing semi-epiphytically on a rock among some duff and moss. We were very excited to find this due to their rarity in the area and the potential species which can be absolutely stunning in bloom. Hopefully we can identify the species if it blooms in 2026 for us in Atlanta. Following the Lilium the path kept climbing higher into the jungle and becoming more difficult to navigate in the rain. We decided to call it a day and returned to the fish farm/homestay area for a final lunch of sticky rice.

We finished the day with another hotpot dinner at the same restaurant as the previous nights. This time one of Thanh's friends from his university days decided to join us. His friend works in the local forestry office in Y Ty, and over the course of dinner he told us about some other forested areas we could explore if we return in 2026. This was exciting to hear given the difficulties in traveling to the area this time around. The area around Y Ty is still very diverse and warrants some future exploration.

Rhododendron aff. emarginatum

Lilium sp. **bulb**

Cutting down Magnolia seed pods

Disanthus ovatifolius

The next day we packed up the van and started the 7-hour drive back to Hanoi. The road from Y Ty to the highway is in poor condition and that part of the drive took a couple of hours. Thankfully once we made it to the highway it was smooth sailing back to Hanoi. We arrived at my hotel shortly before dinner time, and we parted ways for the evening.

The next day Dzu picked me up at my hotel and we drove out to the Me Linh Biodiversity station outside of Hanoi. This is an area operated by VAST to conserve rare fauna and flora of Vietnam. We have been working with our Vietnamese colleagues to develop a small nursery to grow out collections as well as a Magnolia conservation project. This involves growing Magnolia rootstock to graft scions from rare and endangered wild specimens. We came here this time to check in on the progress of the rootstock we had brought over in the spring of 2025. Nearly every tree was healthy and growing well which was great to see. We also planted out 2 seedlings of Magnolia sonlaensis which were collected in the spring as well and they had grown excellent root systems since then. This signifies the first ex-situ conservation collection of Magnolia sonlaensis and hopefully we can experiment and develop propagative methods to increase the number of individuals.

After working on the Magnolia field, we checked on the orchid collection that they have at the Me Linh station. Thanh is the horticulturist at the Me Linh station and was one of our visiting scholars in 2025. He developed a new potting mix for their orchid collection and in the past months had re-potted their entire Paphiopedilum collection with the new mix. The orchids looked extremely healthy and we're excited to see how Thanh applies his training at the Me Linh station. Following this we processed the remaining collections from Y Ty and prepared everything for the phytosanitary certification. We double checked all the collections to make sure

they had the correct information on the bag and everything was clean. Following a short drive back to my hotel, I handed off the collections to Dzu to take to the phytosanitary inspection office. This time around things took longer at the phytosanitary inspection office, and they made an error on the first certificate they provided me. Thankfully I received the correct certificate in time to ship the collections to the USDA inspection station in Atlanta. We were relieved that DHL was still shipping to the USA despite the changes to the de minimis tax exemption system.

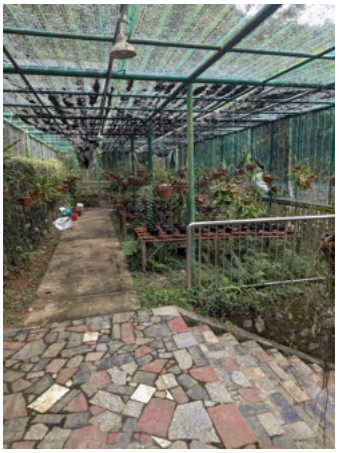
After shipping the box to the USDA and spending a couple days in Hanoi, it was time for me to head home. Our team is excited for future work in Vietnam and we plan to return in April of 2026 to further explore the Son La and Lao Cai provinces. We are also looking forward to bringing more Magnolia rootstock and having some meetings about the next steps in the Magnolia conservation project. Our work in Vietnam continues to grow and make a larger impact as our team develops new projects and we're enthusiastic about what the future holds.

***Magnolia sonlaensis* roots**

VAST/IB Nursery at Me Linh Station

Magnolia understock growing at Me Linh Station





Orchid collection at Me Linh Station


Sticky rice and a typical dinner spread

Forest ranger climbing a Magnolia to cut down seed pods

Foggy/misty days in Ta Xua/Tram Tau

Ilex sp. (large fruit)

Amentotaxus sp.

Impatiens sp.

Polygonatum aff. Mengtzense

Arisaema pingbianense

Processing collections