

Magnolias for the Delaware Valley

By Andrew Bunting

THE MAGNOLIA IS PERHAPS THE MOST HIGHLY REGARDED of all the spring flowering trees for the Delaware Valley. Walking around Swarthmore on an early April day, you will hardly pass a house that doesn't have at least one magnolia in the yard. Many of the old homes have extraordinary specimens of saucer magnolia (*Magnolia × soulangeana*), some well over 80 years old. Walk on down Chester Road toward Swarthmore College and you will be greeted by outstanding specimens of saucer magnolia, Yulan magnolia (*Magnolia denudata*), Loebner magnolia (*Magnolia × loebneri*), and the star magnolia (*Magnolia stellata*). The Scott Arboretum of Swarthmore College holds a national collection of magnolias through the North American Plant Collections Consortium with over 200 different taxa. Our area is so revered for its magnolias that the Magnolia Society International (www.magnoliasociety.org) will hold its annual meeting in the Philadelphia area in 2016.

If magnolias have a shortcoming, it is that there are simply too many great magnolias for any one gardener to grow. But there is definitely a magnolia that will fit every gardener's niche or need for a flowering tree.

Magnolia is a wide-ranging genus. There are eight species native to the United States. Once you get into Cuba, Mexico, and the Caribbean, most of the magnolias become evergreen. Magnolias continue throughout Central America and are found in

northern South American with 27 species alone in Colombia! There are no native species in Europe or Africa, but extensive speciation in Asia. Many deciduous species are found in China, Japan, and South Korea, as well as many evergreen species in southeastern Asia, especially Vietnam, Thailand, and Myanmar, with distribution continuing as far south as Papua, New Guinea.

The early spring flowering magnolias are the ones perhaps most coveted for our region. The largest and most floriferous are the saucer magnolias (*Magnolia × soulangeana*). At maturity, the species can reach up to 50' tall with a spread of 30–40'. Large flowers up to 10" across with many large tepals (the showy part of the magnolia flower is a tepal not a petal) are borne in late March to early April on naked branches. The saucer magnolia is a hybrid between *M. denudata*, which brings white flowers with fragrance to the cross, and *M. liliiflora*, which contributes a broader habit and the pink and purple flowers to the mix. There are many exquisite cultivars



Magnolia × soulangeana
'Alexandrina'

including 'Brozzonii' (white with a rose-purple base); 'Norbertii' (soft pink flowers); and 'Alexandrina' (striking white inner tepals, contrasting with dark purple outer tepals). For the small garden, 'Liliputian' is a diminutive selection.

Yulan magnolia (*M. denudata*) is one of the parents of this exquisite

hybrid. This species can bloom slightly before the saucer magnolias in late March and runs the risk of getting frosted on chilly evenings; however, the risk is worth it. The fragrant, upward-facing, goblet-like flowers are made up of several large white to cream tepals. It, too, blooms before the leaves emerge, thus is not shrouded by any foliage. *M. denudata* is taller than wide and can reach up to 50' at maturity. The Scott Arboretum



Magnolia denudata
'Swarthmore Sentinel'

has made an outstanding selection called 'Swarthmore Sentinel', a broadly fastigiata form that makes the perfect specimen for tighter quarters.

Another of the very early flowering magnolias is the star magnolia, *Magnolia stellata*. The star-like flowers are made up of up to 12–18 narrow,

fragrant tepals. Most *M. stellata* clones bloom in early April and ultimately grow into large, broad-spreading shrubs up to 10' tall. 'Rosea' and 'Jane Platt' have soft pink flowers and 'Royal Star' opens pink and fades to white. 'Centennial', considered one of the best cultivars



Magnolia stellata 'Centennial'

by collectors, was awarded the Gold Medal distinction by the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society. This Arnold Arboretum introduction is more tree-like, reaching up to 25' tall at maturity, and has incredible flowers with 30–40 tepals per flower.

Closely related to the star magnolias is the Loebner magnolia (*Magnolia* × *loebneri*), which is a hybrid between *M. stellata* and *M. kobus*. 'Leonard Messel', one of the best Loebner magnolias, has 12–15 soft pink, fragrant tepals. This hybrid is slightly more tree-like in stature than *M. stellata*, reaching up to 15' at maturity.

In the late 1950s, the Little Girl hybrids were released by the United States National Arboretum. This breeding work combined the shrubby, dark-flowered *M. liliiflora* 'Nigra' with *M. stellata* 'Rosea'. The resulting crosses are cultivars that ultimately become small trees or large, broad-spreading shrubs. The flower colors range from deep pink to deep purple and tend to flower in mid-April, dodging late frosts in most years. In all, eight cultivars were released,

including 'Ann', 'Betty', 'Jane', 'Judy', 'Pinkie', 'Randy', 'Ricki', and 'Susan'. The Scott Arboretum has several mature specimens in its collections and each plant has wonderful



Magnolia 'Ann'

form and is laden with flowers every spring.

Similar in color to the Little Girl hybrids, but larger in stature, are *Magnolia* 'Galaxy' and *M. 'Spectrum'*. 'Galaxy' is a pyramidal tree that will reach 30' tall at maturity. Its large flowers are deep pink-purple. 'Spectrum' has

a broader habit and the flowers are darker than 'Galaxy'. I have seen 'Galaxy' used effectively as a street tree.

Many of the magnolias native to the United States can serve important roles in the landscape. The most versatile of the natives are *Magnolia virginiana* var. *virginiana* and *M. v.* var. *australis*. Commonly called the sweetbay magnolia, *M. virginiana* is found in the Coastal Plain from Massachusetts to Florida. It can be grown as a single-trunked or multi-stemmed



Magnolia virginiana var. *australis* 'Henry Hicks'

tree. At maturity, it can reach nearly 40' tall. The flowers are much smaller than the spring flowering types, but are creamy white with an intense lemony fragrance. They first appear in May, but can sporadically occur throughout the summer. Cultivars, such as 'Greenbay' and 'Henry Hicks', are selections of *M. v.* var. *australis* (which occurs from South Carolina to Florida). These trees are evergreen

by nature and will remain nearly evergreen even in the winters in the Delaware Valley. Any clone of *M. v.* var. *virginiana* will be completely deciduous in our winters and is one of

the very few magnolia species that can thrive in poorly drained soils—in the wild, it is often found on the edges of ponds and lakes.

Another very important North American species is the Southern magnolia (*Magnolia grandiflora*). This is a highly valued, broad-leaved evergreen tree throughout the South. It can tower to over 70' tall and has very large, shiny, attractive leaves. In the summer, the white, upward-facing flowers can be up to 12" across and have an incredible sweet fragrance. While this ubiquitous tree of the South thrives better in those climes, there are several cultivars that grow very well in the Delaware Valley. 'D. D. Blanchard' has beautiful lustrous leaves and the underside has an attractive brown indumentum. This is the best cultivar to use as a single specimen or for screening purposes.

'Kay Parris' is a relatively new selection, which is significantly more diminutive. At maturity, it will only reach 25' tall and the leaves and the

flowers are reduced in size compared to the species. 'Kay Parris' is a great choice for the smaller garden or can be effectively used as an espalier.

For a tropical effect in the garden, I would recommend three of the native large-leaved magnolias including *M. macrophylla*, *M. tripetala*, and the highly coveted *M. macrophylla* subsp. *ashei* (Ashe magnolia). This endangered plant in the wild is found only in a few counties in the Panhandle of Florida and into Alabama. In the garden, Ashe magnolia reaches only 12' high, but has enormous leaves over 12" long and very large, upward-facing, fragrant white flowers.

The yellow hybrid magnolias, which generally bloom at the end of April as the leaves are emerging,



Magnolia 'Lois' flower details



Magnolia 'Judy Zuk'

have as one of the parents the native cucumber tree magnolia (*Magnolia acuminata*). While the flower on *M. acuminata* is relatively small and inconspicuous, it is slightly yellow, and through hybridization has resulted in many stunning, yellow-flowered cultivars. Today, there are over 50 different yellow cultivars. 'Butterflies', considered one of the best by magnolia collectors, has a flower with 16 narrow,

clear yellow tepals. 'Lois' has broader flowers that sit like golden goblets on the stems. 'Judy Zuk', a complex hybrid between *M. stellata*, *M. liliiflora*, and *M. acuminata*, has tulip-shaped, golden yellow flowers with a hint of pink at the base of the tepals and a wonderful fruity fragrance.

While endless cultivars and species are available to us for our gardens, the magnolia world as we

know it is changing rapidly and future offerings will be mind-boggling. Many new species have been collected in recent years from China and Vietnam. These species, such as *Magnolia yuyuanensis*, *M. insignis*, and others, are bringing new germplasm to breeders, resulting in new cultivars unlike anything we have seen in the past. Soon there will be pink- and red-flowered evergreen magnolias or large, open, white flowers with exquisite exposed purple stamens. The future for ornamental magnolias is very exciting!



Andrew Bunting has been curator of the Scott Arboretum since 1993. He is president of the *Magnolia Society International*; president of the *Delaware Center for Horticulture*; and president of the *Swarthmore Horticultural Society*. Andrew is presently writing a book for Timber Press, *Plant Lover's Guide to Magnolias*.

Ed Note: The photos in this article are courtesy of the Scott Arboretum. For a full-color version of this article, go to the HPS/MAG web site, www.hardyplant.org.