The Arboretum’s magnolia collection is a great joy to visitors each spring. About 250 specimens—the third-largest collection in the country—grace the park with their primordial beauty. Many of these are cultivars, but there is also a nice representation of species: Twenty-six of the 120 magnolia species in the genus worldwide grow here.

Magnolias, considered to be among the first flowering plants, can be found growing in the wild throughout the Americas and Southeast Asia, where the highest concentration of species occurs. This rather scattered distribution is due to the age of the genus, about 100 million years, and the fact it has survived many geological changes and upheavals. As for the plants themselves, they have changed little in their long tenure on Earth.

Among the many showy-flowered species, cultivars and hybrid magnolias in the Arboretum, one is notable for the uniqueness of its foliage: *Magnolia officinalis*, commonly known as the Houpu or spice magnolia. A deciduous tree native to China, *M. officinalis* grows from 20 to 50 feet tall and is found at elevations of 300 to 1500 meters.
in its home range. Its flowers are typical of the genus: large, loose-petaled and fragrant. They bloom in May and June after the leaves expand. The large leaves—up to 20 inches long by some accounts—have a bicolor appearance: pale green on the upper surface and finely downy beneath, giving a silvery effect.

The plant has been part of Chinese pharmacopoeia since the first century AD and is still widely cultivated for that purpose. Primarily used to treat digestive disorders, the tree’s bark is peeled, dried and made into a tea. Modern researchers have found that the two active compounds in the bark, honokiol and magnolol, have antioxidant, anti-inflammatory and anti-microbial effects, and may even shrink tumors.

Two varieties of the plant are known: *Magnolia officinalis* var. *officinalis* and *biloba*. They differ mainly in their leaf shape: The former has a rounded leaf tip, while the latter has a deep notch on the tips of its leaves. Magnolia expert G.H. Johnstone observed that many *M. officinalis* var. *officinalis* leaves show apical notches, but in the variety *biloba* the notching appears on nearly every leaf.

We have two specimens of *M. officinalis* var. *biloba* in the Arboretum. The oldest can be found at the south end of the Magnolia Collection, just west of the parking lot on the west side of Arboretum Drive. It came to us as seed in January 1960 from a tree growing in Windsor Great Park, in England. The seed was planted the same year, and one grew to a 13-foot sapling in the nursery before being planted in the Magnolia Collection in March of 1980. It is now about 40 feet tall and vigorous.

A year later, the Arboretum received wild-collected *biloba* seed from the Shanghai Botanical Garden. One sapling of this batch of seed was planted in the Arboretum in March of 1990, when it was five-and-a-half feet tall. It is not difficult to find, growing along Azalea Way, right behind the sign at the entrance to the Rhododendron Hybrid Garden. It is a healthy and full tree of 25 feet, covered with flowers each spring.

If you’d like to do a leaf comparison with the straight species, *M. officinalis* var. *officinalis*, we have five specimens growing in Arboretum—including three young trees gifted in 2009 by Dan Hinkley (two of which are planted near the China entry garden at Pacific Connections). Two lovely, mature, 40-foot specimens can be found near the path, just as you walk from the north part of the Magnolia Collection down into Loderi Valley.

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