



Magnolias of the ARBORETUM

BY RAY LARSON

Magnolia grandiflora 'Exoniensis'.
(Photo by Niall Dunne)

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The Washington Park Arboretum features one of the larger public collections of magnolias in the United States. Magnolias have been an important part of the University of Washington Botanic Gardens' collection here since the establishment of the Arboretum in 1934. Since 2013, our magnolias have been part of the Magnolia Multisite Collection of the Plant Collections Network—which is administered by the American Public Gardens Association, in collaboration with the US Department of Agriculture's Agricultural Research Service. It is one of 17 gardens throughout North America that comprise the Multisite Collection for the continent. The Network facilitates collaboration between the member gardens, enabling them to strengthen their magnolia collections, and it provides a comprehensive collection of the entire *Magnolia* genus across member gardens in different climates.

With its temperate marine climate—characterized by mild, relatively dry summers and cool, wet winters—our region is excellent for growing many magnolia species. Currently the Arboretum has over 250 individual specimens representing 34 magnolia species, four subspecies and varieties, and 65 cultivated varieties. The collection is spread through several areas of the Arboretum but is concentrated in the Magnolia family (Magnoliaceae) section, just to south of the Woodland Garden, along Arboretum Drive. This section was laid out in the original Olmsted Brothers plan for the Arboretum in 1936 and covers about four acres.

MATURE SPECIMENS

The largest and tallest trees in the Magnoliaceae section (not including the Douglas firs and western red cedars in the surrounding native matrix) are mature tulip trees, *Liriodendron tulipifera*, accessioned in 1937. (Along with *Magnolia*, *Liriodendron* is one of two



genera in the Magnoliaceae.) This deciduous eastern U.S. native has become a popular street tree in Seattle, due to its fast growth, distinctively shaped leaves, and lovely, tulip-like, pale-yellow flowers and golden fall foliage color. The towering cluster of tulip trees in the Arboretum's collection puts on a wonderful display each fall.

Though *Magnolia* species were planted in the Arboretum from the beginning, accelerated development of the collection took place in the late 1940s through the 1950s, under the supervision of Brian Mulligan. Mulligan, director of the Arboretum from 1946 to 1972, was trained at the Royal Horticultural Society's garden at Wisley and maintained many contacts in Great Britain and elsewhere, who became sources for new plants. The Arboretum features many fine mature specimens from that period, particularly of Asian species. We have impressive specimens of Campbell's magnolia (*Magnolia campbellii*), Yulan magnolia (*M. denudata*), Sprenger's magnolia (*M. sprengeri*), Dawson's magnolia (*M. dawsoniana*), *M. sargentii* and *M. × veitchii*.

To highlight just a couple of these, we have 10 specimens of the stunning Campbell's magnolia, native to the Himalayas. Obtained from Hillier and

Sons Nursery (England), Royal Botanic Gardens Kew and Bodnant Garden (Wales), among others, most of the specimens are planted in the midst of our Camellia Collection at the south end of the Arboretum. They add vertical interest to the camellias, as well as pink and white, cup-and-saucer-shaped spring flowers. A mature *Magnolia × veitchii* (one of five specimens in the Arboretum) also grows among the camellias in this section of the park. A hybrid of *M. campbellii* and *M. denudata* created by Peter Veitch at the Royal Nurseries in England, it boasts beautiful pink-white, chalice-shaped spring flowers.

We also have lovely mature specimens of summer-blooming southern magnolia (*M. grandiflora*), both straight species and cultivated selections. (The oldest specimen, growing in the center of the main Magnoliaceae collection, dates back to 1938.) In the earlier decades of the Arboretum, some of the cultivars occasionally experienced winter damage, but this has been uncommon over the last 20 years.

The Arboretum was the first public garden in the region to acquire and cultivate many particular species, and because of this, nearly 20 magnolias in the collection are recognized as state champions of their kind. A major renovation of the collection was undertaken in the 1990s. Shading of the collections has always been a concern, and at this time, several western red cedars were removed or thinned to create better growing conditions. Redundant or poor examples of some magnolias were removed, while some were transplanted to better sites. Numerous new species and many new cultivars were added.

A MEMORABLE SELECTION

The Arboretum's most well-known contribution to magnolia cultivation was the selection and introduction of *Magnolia × kewensis* 'Wada's Memory'. In 1940, we purchased a batch of *Magnolia kobus* seedlings as part of a larger order of maples, camellias and magnolias from Koichiro Wada's nursery in Numazu, Japan. Many of the seedlings were planted throughout the Arboretum, but one in particular



Magnolia 'Wada's Memory'
(Photo by Ray Larson)



Close up of a 'Wada's Memory' flower.
(Photo by Niall Dunne)



Magnolia sieboldii spp. *sinensis*.
(Photo by Niall Dunne)

had much larger flowers than the others and bore them in great profusion. The plant had the added benefits of maintaining a compact, conical habit and flowering at a young age. In 1959, Brian Mulligan published a description of the tree as a variety of *Magnolia kobus* and named it in honor of Mr. Wada. (It was later determined to likely be of hybrid origin, with *Magnolia salicifolia* also contributing to its parentage.) The original tree survives to this day and is a spectacular sight along Arboretum Drive each year.

During most years, 'Wada's Memory' flowers from late March to early April in the Seattle area. Fast growing in youth, it is strongly pyramidal and produces abundant white flowers of a light fragrance. New foliage growth is bronzy-purple, while fall color is a pleasing yellow. 'Wada's Memory' has proven to be well suited to both colder and warmer climates and grows well through most parts of the United States. It received an Award of Garden Merit from the Royal Horticultural Society in 1993, and is still widely planted and admired.

POPULARIZED BY THE ARBORETUM

In 1949, we received *Magnolia cylindrica* as a scion

(a cutting grafted onto rootstock) in 1949 from a plant grown from seed by Mrs. J. Norman Henry of Gladwyne, Pennsylvania. She had gotten the seed from the Lushan Botanical Garden in Jiangxi Province, China, in 1936. Our tree was planted out in the Arboretum in 1952 and bloomed for the first time in 1959. At the time, the species was relatively unknown in cultivation, and the Arboretum was largely responsible for its distribution to West Coast gardens. It's an excellent small tree for sunny locations, offering fragrant, white and pink, lily-like blooms in spring; large, bright-red, cylindrical fruits in summer; yellow fall color; and attractive, smooth, gray bark. Sadly, the species is threatened by habitat loss in its home range of southeast China.

An unusual species that we've grown for a long time is *Magnolia tamaulipana*—an evergreen, summer-blooming tree native to cloud forests in Mexico. A close relative of *M. grandiflora* it is listed as endangered in its home range, due to habitat loss and harvesting for firewood and medicinal use. We first received the plant as seed from Missouri Botanic Garden in 1948. A seedling was planted out in 1953, and in 1971 was among the first specimens in cultivation to flower. The tree has flowered somewhat sporadically since then, with some years being better than others. The flowers are creamy white and up to six inches wide.

The top of the tree was damaged in the cold winter of 1990, but the plant recovered well and has grown into a substantial specimen, about 30 feet tall by 20 feet wide. Planted on a slope above Azalea Way, just north of the Woodland Garden lower pond, it receives lots of sun, from late morning onward. It has also likely benefitted from

being in a somewhat protected spot, sheltered from winds and cold pockets. The milder winters of recent decades have probably helped too. We have distributed the species to other gardens over the years, and we planted two other specimens ourselves, in 1968 and 2011. Both are doing well, though they are sited in shadier locations.

Another somewhat uncommon species that we grow is *M. sieboldii* ssp. *sinensis*, which has a restricted distribution in the northwest part of the Sichuan province of China. Our original plant dates back to 1947, when we acquired it from Hillier and Sons. It was planted at the north end of the Magnoliaceae collection in 1952 and first bloomed in 1958. It typically blooms the first week of May for us and has a sweet scent similar to that of *M. wilsonii*. But it is much smaller plant and closer to *M. sieboldii* ssp. *sieboldii* in most respects.

We recently received a second specimen from plant explorer Dan Hinkley—a small plant grown from seed that he collected in the wild in 2013. It is now large enough to plant out in the Arboretum this fall. Dr. Koen Camelbeke, of Arboretum Wespelaar, was particularly interested in seeing our original specimen when he visited the Arboretum in May 2015.

NEW AND UNUSUAL

In the Chinese Entry Garden at Pacific Connections, we have a wonderful example of yellow lily tree, *Magnolia ernestii*, which has put on good growth and bloomed profusely since it was transplanted at 20 feet tall from a private garden in 2008. This has proven to be one of the hardier evergreen Asian species for us in the Pacific Northwest. Bloom time is usually mid spring, and the fragrant flowers vary in color between soft yellow and white.

In recent years, we have continued to add magnolias to the collection, with an emphasis on plants of known wild origin. Thanks to our long relationship with Dan Hinkley, we have been able to try new species from previously less explored areas, such as northern Vietnam and parts of China. We will be trialing several new specimens recently received from Dan's collections in

northern Vietnam, including several with affinity to the red lotus tree, *M. insignis*. Our participation in the Magnolia Multisite Collection has resulted in new germplasm being introduced and the opportunity to trial other new species and subspecies. It is exciting to see these bloom for the first time, and to test their hardiness in our area.

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SUMMER-BLOOMING MAGNOLIAS IN THE ARBORETUM

Following are magnolias that produce summer blooms in our region. Some spring-flowering species—such as *M. acuminata*, *M. liliflora*, *M. fraseri* and *M. lotungensis*—may also bloom into early summer or sporadically produce flowers in summertime.

Magnolia grandiflora, southern magnolia

This iconic tree of the southeastern U.S. bears elliptical, glossy, evergreen leaves and large, fragrant, cup-shaped, creamy-white flowers. You'll find a number of mature specimens in the main Magnoliaceae section.

Magnolia x 'Freeman', Freeman magnolia

A hybrid of *M. grandiflora* and *M. virginiana*, this tree looks a lot like *grandiflora*, but has smaller leaves and flowers. Two specimens grow at the north end of the Sorbus collection, across Arboretum Drive from the main Magnoliaceae section.

Magnolia tamaulipana

An unusual evergreen species from Mexico, closely related to *M. grandiflora*. (See main article for location.)

Magnolia virginiana, sweet bay magnolia

An eastern U.S. native, this magnolia is semi-evergreen here in Seattle and produces two-inch-wide, strongly scented, cup-shaped white flowers. You'll find a cluster growing along Azalea Way, across from the Rhododendron Hybrid Garden.