

Up After the Down-facing Magnolia

by Barry Yinger

Magnolia sieboldii is with ample justification a familiar feature of many Western gardens. With its elegance of form and flower and long season of bloom it seems destined to be a plant of enduring popularity. Thorough and interesting accounts of its introduction and cultivation have from time to time appeared in the West, most recently in Neil G. Treseder's excellent *Magnolias*. Nevertheless, supplementary comments about history and habitat may be of interest to those who are charmed by this alluring plant.

Magnolia sieboldii has evidently been cultivated for a very long time in Japan, but it is surprisingly uncommon in gardens there despite its civilized growth habit and the gleaming elegance of its blossoms. Its scarcity as a garden tree may have to do with the nodding position of its flowers; the Japanese traditionally have avoided using plants in the garden with a pendulous habit, associating such a habit of growth with death.

In searching elsewhere to account for this tree's cultivation in Japan we arrive at the tea house, a unique feature of the Japanese aesthetic experience which in its stark simplicity is paradoxically at the heart of many of the complex concepts of Japanese aesthetics. It seems likely that it was within the simple rustic confines of the tea cottage that *Magnolia sieboldii* found its most appreciative audience.

The floral decorations of the tea cottage must be simple indeed to be in keeping with the spirit of the tea ceremony, often consisting of nothing more than a single blossom, a bare branch of evocative form, a sprig of foliage, or a fruit-laden twig arranged in a deceptively artless fashion in a rustic container of wood, bamboo, or rough ceramic. The spare furnishings and the floral decorations in the close confines of the tea cottage are subject to the close and leisurely contemplation of the guests present for the tea ceremony, and *Magnolia sieboldii* is particularly appealing in this setting: the smooth glowing flower buds, the graceful white flowers with contrasting stamens, and the dusty-rose cones all hold their charms. Since the guests are seated on the floor, the nodding flowers are particularly suitable for display in a container mounted on

the wall where they can be admired by the guests below.

Kaname Kato writes about this use of *Magnolia sieboldii*, citing *Chaseki Soka Shu* (a compendium of tea cottage flower arrangements), published in the late 18th century. Therein are mentioned three forms of *Magnolia sieboldii* used for tea cottage decoration: one with purple stamens, a second with red stamens, and yet a third with yellow stamens. Such variations, of course, are rather more important in the intimate surroundings mentioned in the foregoing than they might be in the garden landscape. Today the form with red stamens is the one commonly cultivated in Japan, although plants bearing yellow stamens are common in the wild.

Another fascinating if perplexing reference to *Magnolia sieboldii* can be found in *So Moku Kin Yo Shu* (a compendium of silver-leaved trees and shrubs), 1815, a monumental seven-volume collection of drawings and descriptions of more than 1000 plant mutations grown by the Japanese, for the most part with variegated foliage. This book stated that there was no form of *Magnolia sieboldii* with variegated leaves in cultivation, but that a form did exist in which "After the flower buds develop, the flower blooms as if it is captured in a spider's web." Alas, no drawing immortalized this astonishing event.

It seems odd that the Japanese, who at one time or another have cultivated a variegated form of nearly every indigenous organism containing chlorophyll, have not produced a



Magnolia × *thompsoniana* 'Urbana' flower
at *Gloster Arboretum*.

variegated selection of this tree. As Treseder notes, a variegated form he calls *Magnolia sieboldii* "Variegata" (described by the Japanese botanist Nakai as *Magnolia sieboldii* forma *variegata*) is spontaneous on Chiisan in Korea, but this may not be in cultivation and may never have been.

Another lovely variant still in cultivation in Japan is a multi-tepalled form listed as *Magnolia sieboldii* forma *plena* by Kato, described as *M. sieboldii* 'Kwanso' by Treseder, and known in Japan as *Michiko Renge*. The flower, to its credit, is not fully double, instead bearing two or three times the normal complement of nine tepals while retaining the red stamens which are reduced in size by half. It is grown by at least one large nursery in Japan that trades regularly with European nurseries, but this beautiful form seems to be absent from Western gardens.

One indication of the long Japanese interest in *Magnolia sieboldii* is that it is known there by several names, a situation which in Japan often implies prolonged attention from a variety of sources. One of these names is the Japanese reading of the Chinese characters which are this tree's name in Chinese, and several others that are presumably of purely

Japanese origin. It should be noted here that the name given by Treseder as the Chinese name of *Magnolia sieboldii*, "Tennyoka" (princess flower), is in fact the Japanese way of reading the Chinese name; the Chinese name, in Chinese, should be read "Tian Nu Hua." The most common name in Japan seems to be *Oyama Renge*, *Oyama* being a reference to the mountain by that name in Nara Prefecture, which is one of the tree's native homes, and *renge* being Japanese for "lotus blossom." Other native Japanese names are *Oyama Ren.* and *Oyama Renge*, in which a different Chinese character is used to write the *ge* in *renge*, this alternative character can be read as either "China" or "flower."

My first encounter with *Magnolia sieboldii* in the wild was on Misen, a peak of Oyama, a mountain graced by extensive native colonies of *M. sieboldii*. Oyama is also dear to legions of Japanese male chauvinists, since much of the area is under the control of a temple whose authorities refuse to allow women to profane its turf. *Magnolia sieboldii* is not often seen by weekend botanizers in Japan (even male ones), not because it is exceptionally rare, but because it grows (at least now) in areas so remote that one has to be even daffier than

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Yet I was keen to make the effort, not only because I had failed to find this tree growing in the wild on a number of earlier forays into the mountains of Japan, but also because my companion on this and other adventures, Dr. Toshio Ando, had shown me photographs of the flowers of *Magnolia sieboldii* growing on Misen, and these invariably had yellow stamens, showing at most only a trace of pink. Not having seen this form in cultivation I was intent on collecting seed and a few seedlings to carry back to Chollipo Arboretum.

We embarked early on a Saturday morning at the beginning of September, which to me seemed much too early to collect seed, but I was assured by my companion that our destination was far colder than our point of departure. As it turned out I was wise to heed his advice and stuff my pack with winter clothing. Had we marched directly up the mountain (or as directly as the convoluted terrain would permit) we could have reached *Magnolia sieboldii* at 4500 feet within five or six hours, but there were far too many delights on the lower slopes for us to remain glued to our purpose.

In the dank shade of *Cryptomeria*, a very rare saprophytic orchid, *Galeola septentrionalis*, was fruiting, displaying improbable banana-bunches of garish red sausages suspended on succulent leafless stalks. The umbrella leaves of *Acanthopanax sciadophylloides* were still intact against the approaching autumn, and the seldom-cultivated *Viburnum urceolatum* was bent under the weight of its red fruit. I gave excited attention to *Rubus peltatus*, a rare white-stemmed species with large leathery peltate leaves felted white beneath, as my friend flitted about snaring seed pods of *Impatiens hypophylla*, which carpeted the forest floor with pale lavender, competing with fuzzy white expanses of *Cimicifuga japonica*. Before long we became so jaded that even the discovery of a seedling of *Quercus mongolica* var. *grosseserrata* with beautifully white-variegated foliage elicited little more than mild surprise from either of us.

It was late afternoon before we encountered the object of our trip. I was disappointed that this first meeting was on a slope that had been cut over a few years before, and could offer no good impression of how *Magnolia sieboldii* behaves in areas devoid of human manipulation. But there they were: bushy, multi-

stemmed trees rising above thickets of *Enkianthus*, *Corylopsis*, *Viburnum furcatum*, *V. plicatum*, and *Lindera umbellata* var. *lancea*. Covering the ground was a carpet of the rare *Rubus pseudoacer*, its leaves a perfect mimic of *Acer palmatum* 'Dissectum.'

We pushed on to areas that, my friend assured me, were quite undisturbed, and soon I was satisfied. On the slope above a ravine gouged by a quick rocky stream we encountered dense thickets of *Magnolia sieboldii* so heavy with cones that from a distance the verdure seemed shot through with roses. The tangled shrubs grew in luxuriance near the stream (where I was briefly distracted by the vicious charms of *Oplopanax japonicus*), extending back and up into the shade of *Picea jezoensis* var. *hondoensis*, *Tsuga diversifolia*, and *Abies veitchii*. So dense was this undulating colony of tall shrubbery that collecting seed cones was a daunting exercise best performed by trained monkeys. Our packs considerably swelled, we continued climbing, prodded by the approaching twilight, yet never again losing sight of our magnolia.

But as we ascended above the stream valley its habit of growth changed dramatically. No more bushy jungles were to be seen, only scattered shrubs on the floor of the gradually thinning forest, here accompanied by mats of *Ilex rugosa* var. *stenophylla* sparsely decorated with red berries, and ever more interesting herbs: *Diphylleia grayi*, *Lilium japonicum*, *L. medeoloides*, and *Actaea spicata*. *Magnolia sieboldii* became smaller and smaller as we struggled to the summit, suffering reduction from the 15 foot tall masses we had seen below to scraggly waist-high individuals.

In Japan, more than most countries, to everything there is a season; a season to view a



Magnolia virginiana at Gloster Arboretum.

particular plant with awed interest, and a season to as intently ignore it. September is not the season for *Magnolia sieboldii* in the Japanese mind. Thus it was that we were greeted at twilight with some astonishment by the old man who maintained the now empty hostel at the top of the mountain. An explanation of our mission did little to dispel the opinion written on his battered face that the two filthy waifs he beheld must, at best, be escapees from one of those institutions that very carefully regulates the comings and goings of its residents. It later struck me as odd he should be surprised by our behavior since, as he later told us, he was living alone on this mountaintop to avoid the pressures of a more urban life. What to him was urban life, apparently, was his home village, one that we had passed enroute. From all appearances it was a place that would bore the dead. Still, he was kind enough to give us a kettle of hot water to take the edge off a bone-chilling *al fresco* bath, feed us, and let us sleep in his slightly heated room instead of the unheated barn where guests are accommodated in balmy weather.

More or less reconstituted, we began our descent early the following morning, taking an entirely different and much steeper route on the north side of the mountain. As we descended through the vast chasm cleft by a violent river we encountered a much different blend of vegetation. *Trochodendron aralioides* and *Chamaecyparis obtusa* grew in abundance, accompanied by *Acer palmatum* and *Clethra barbinervis*. *Leucothoe keiskei*, *Shortia uniflora*, *S. soldanelloides*, and *Menziesia pentandra* were colonized on rock faces, and *Parnassia foliosa* trimmed the wetter ledges with fringes of snowflake flowers. Farther on we came upon groves of *Sciadopitys verticillata*, soaring spars sparingly draped with veils of rubbery needles. Although distracted by these new delights, we were happy once again to see *Magnolia sieboldii*, growing here as sturdy individual shrubs wedged among the rocks and occasionally congregating into groups of five or ten plants. All in all I was struck by its considerable adaptability, having by now seen it growing in thickets at streamside and as individuals in cleared areas, on the heavily shaded forest floor, and perched on rocky crags above the river, apparently relatively indifferent to the rather abrupt changes in micro-habitat. It did not, however, deign to

descend very far from its lofty perch; by the time we got down to 4000 feet *Magnolia sieboldii* had disappeared, at least from our view.

Of course, *Magnolia sieboldii*'s range extends far beyond Japan. Treseder mentions its occurrence in Korea, citing Kosloff's statement that it is found in northern Korea. It should be noted that its range here in Korea is far greater than this, being found in the wild, often in abundance, in most of the southern part of the country as well. Here at Chollipo Arboretum we will eventually be able to observe differences among various Korean and Japanese clones as they display themselves in cultivation. It is to be hoped that as plant collectors begin to move about more freely in China we will also be able to see and grow clones of known provenance from China too. Selection from such a wide range of materials may eventually lead to the availability of clones that are superior in beauty or in tolerance of various environmental distresses. Even if this is not to be, we can at least expect to know more about the many personalities of this refined and useful species.

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