

# An Old Southern Manner of Growing *Magnolia grandiflora*

by Carl R. Amason

Perhaps of all trees native to the South, which is a natural forest region, none is better known and loved than *Magnolia grandiflora*. It is hardy in all sections of the South except for some of the higher elevations, although its natural range is the low country of the coastal plains of the Atlantic Ocean and the Gulf of Mexico. Probably at no place was its original habitat more than two hundred miles from salt water. In fact, its range is not as far reaching either north or south, as *Tillandsia usneoides*, Spanish moss. Yet, even in the early days of poor transportation and few nurseries, *Magnolia grandiflora* was well distributed and planted and to this day, most Southerners will accept it as THE magnolia and even the rather similar appearing *Magnolia virginiana* is commonly looked upon as an imposter to the genus.

To the early South Arkansan, clearing the forest was the first order of business in getting farms and plantations established. Clear cutting was extended to the homesite, also. There were several reasons for clearing up thoroughly around the home. Foremost was the malaria problem. At that time, malaria still was not well understood, but air circulation was felt to be necessary so the homesite could dry out in summer and dampness could be reduced as much as possible in the winter to reduce mosquitoes, termites, and molds to a minimum.

Lawns of grasses were almost unknown in the South, in fact the opposite of a lawn effect was maintained. The home premises were hoed free of all grasses and weeds and all ornamental horticultural attempts were restricted to a lay-out of rock or brick edged beds in a somewhat formal effect with bare ground all around, carefully brushbroomed daily.

Generally, there would be several utilitarian shade trees near the house, most of which would be to the rear where there would be a beehive of activity in the summer. Preferred shade trees were of a few species: white oak, post oak, live oak, laurel oak, willow oak, water oak, catalpa, chinaberry, red cedar, American sycamore, and, surprisingly, everbearing mulberry. As every farm was considered a self-supporting enterprise, most of the outbuildings such as barns, cowsheds, chickenhouses, and tenant houses were at the edge of the few shade trees and most of the mulberry trees were planted about the chicken yards.

Pine trees of any species were never an acceptable tree for home planting in those times in the deep south. But *Magnolia grandiflora* was a popular but often difficult to obtain tree, and with few exceptions was planted to the front of the house. To me, it is no wonder that Andrew Jackson planted

two in the south lawn of the White House in Washington. Whereas all the shade trees were trimmed high for ease of getting to the shade, tying horses to the trunks, or just working in summer shade, magnolias were treated differently. It was usually considered desecration to remove the lower limbs on them. They were kept intact and pegged to the ground. In due time, these limbs took root and sent up secondary trunks and became a prominent landscape feature.

Why were the limbs pegged to the ground? As far as I know, the practice of taking up rooted layers of magnolias and giving them to friends and relatives was not common. I'm sure that it was done but that was not the primary reason for pegging down the magnolia limbs. As everyone who has a southern magnolia tree knows, they are constantly shedding leaves. They also are just as aware that nothing will grow under a magnolia, even if it is trimmed high. Even in this era of cultivated lawns, it is very difficult to maintain satisfactory grass sod beneath one. In the old days, all fallen leaves were brushbroomed back under the interior of the tree. This was done at least once a week, and it was a sloppy yardkeeper that permitted otherwise. This solved the problem of leaf disposal. Another tree that is similarly treated is the fruiting fig. As any Southerner will tell you, the best fertilizer for a magnolia tree is a mulch of its own leaves, and likewise for the fig tree.

I have used the verb brushbroomed deliberately because that was exactly what was done. A brushbroom was a small bundle of supple saplings tied together with rags, the saplings about a half inch in diameter at the big end and about four feet long with fine twigs at the ends. They are very effective in sweeping bare ground clean. They are still preferred by some of the older country women though metal rakes last longer.

One of the luckiest things that can happen to a child down South is to have access to one of these noble old magnolia trees. Girls can improvise playhouses complete with large branches for room dividers, shelves, tables, and cookstoves, and put their dolls to bed on fresh brown leaves, and the boys can play Tarzan at a safe distance above the ground. Or do children play in such fashion nowadays?

I am aware of many such fine old trees in south Arkansas and north Louisiana and I'm sure they were a source of great pride to the owners through the years, and they have certainly given me much pleasure many years later.

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