

An Immodest Proposal

Dr. John Creech was right on target during his welcoming speech April 1 to AMS members meeting in Washington at the U. S. National Arboretum, where he's director. If you want to enlarge the public's appreciation and knowledge of plants and horticulture, you first have to get them to come and look at the plants, Dr. Creech said. Once that seed is planted, the rest comes a little more naturally.

The ordinary householder who stops in a garden shop or nursery looking for something to fit his itching thumb normally sees and is shown no further than rows of cans with their displays of blooms or greenery. He picks the rose, camellia, rhododendron, azalea or smaller plant whose flower, color, or shape appeals most to him. Sometimes he'll pick a canned *Magnolia grandiflora*, not because it has flowers on it but because it's one plant he can recognize on sight and nobody needs to tell him how beautiful the flowers will be when the tree grows up. He knows.

Can you blame him for not choosing some other straggling *Magnolia* treelet he knows nothing about—when it'll reach flowering age, how big it'll be eventually, how many flowers there'll be, what they'll look like, and other information an owner has the right to know before he bestows his time, his money, and, most of all, his affection?

How many nurseries display a full grown *Magnolia* of any kind, to say nothing of enough trees of different species and cultivars to show the versatility in flower and form of this queen of flowering trees? Then where can the prospective gardener go to have the *Magnolia* experience which will, at the wave of a tepal, enamor him forever?

If we understood right, one of the places Dr. Creech hopes he or she will go is the U. S. National Arboretum. Now 50 years old, this comparatively new national treasure seems on the way to becoming the showcase of the Nation's Capital, as it should have been when it was chartered in 1927. Dr. Creech noted that it has just added 33 more acres to bring its holdings to 450 acres, which he figures are only about 40 percent planted.

One of the assets which seem to assure that the National Arboretum and its plantings are going to be receiving more attention from the public is Dr. Creech himself. An example of this energetic director's instinct to do the right thing at the right time was his role in the acquisition and housing of the fabulous bonsai collection presented last year as a bicentennial gift to the people of the U. S. from the people of Japan. It called for skill and impeccability in dealing with quarantine requirements and in handling the centuries-old plants in their containers with a minimum of disturbance, as well as diplomacy and understanding in allaying concerns on both sides of the Pacific by horticulturists on the one hand and by political figures on the other.

The bonsai collection joins the equally imposing Gotelli collection of conifers which has been pleasing visitors since it was contributed several years ago.

There are impressive plantings of azaleas, camellias, rhododendrons, and hollies, including many that were contributed. But this only Federal institution of its kind, located at the seat of government where every citizen hopes to visit some day, needs a more complete Magnolia collection than it has at present for public viewing.

The present collection is large, and Magnolias represent some of the arboretum's most venerable plantings. In the spring and in early summer they whiten and pinken a broad and gentle slope, traversed by two tiny streams, with the most charming vistas anywhere on the grounds. When the flowers open in spring they attract hundreds of visitors, many of whom are seeing Magnolia's variety for the first time. But the collection is by no means complete, nor even close to it. There are some conspicuous gaps that are only now beginning to be filled after several years of eclipse and benign neglect while other flowering plants received such attention as the budget would allow.

Dr. Creech in his address to AMS members noted that the National Arboretum has a dual function: to provide pleasure and education to the public and to develop hybrids or cultivars of plants with more desirable qualities for home gardens and public parks and plantings.

There can be no doubt that the first function should get top priority. The arboretum should show visitors as wide a selection of Magnolias, for instance, as the climate and its facilities will allow. Ideally they would be tagged or placarded so that the public can verify with its own eyes that there are at least six species of Magnolia native to the United States, every one a handsome tree, and at least twice that number from Asian countries that are reasonably hardy in mid-Atlantic latitudes. Besides basic species there are also an ever increasing number of hybrids and cultivars as well as existing subspecies and forms that should be on view. Taken together, they represent a significant evolutionary period in the history of flowering plants. The average householder ought to be made privy to the heady information that there are Magnolias other than *M. grandiflora* (southerners) and *M. X soulangiana* (northerners).

To reach flowering age Magnolias require several years, sometimes as many as 20 years when raised from seed. Therefore, the best time to plant a Magnolia, as the sign says at the entrance to Ken Durio's nursery in Opelousas, Louisiana, "was several years ago. The next best time is now."

It would seem appropriate to plant Magnolias of one species or kind in informal groups of three or more for optimum effect and so there would be no missing species whenever individual dead or injured trees have to be replaced by young specimens. Maps with locations of each group would be helpful to visitors desiring to make comprehensive tours.

Of the several Magnolia species and forms that are not represented in or are inadequately represented in public plantings at the National Arboretum and which are known to be hardy in the area, all are cultivated by various AMS members in many locations, along with practically any hybrid or cultivar grown in the western hemisphere. Our Society could, through contributing members,



Magnolia sprengeri 'Diva'

provide the arboretum with any *Magnolia* specimen it could desire, and gladly. All that's needed are a want list and shipping instructions. It would be in the interest of public education about these primitive and glorious flowering trees and of *Magnolia* culture in general for the arboretum to let AMS members know which ones it can use in future planting programs—and when it can spade them in. In years past some of our members such as Tom Dodd, Jr. have been frequent contributors of both wild and cultivated plants to the arboretum. A connoisseur like Phil Savage has dabbled in the genus long and diligently enough to set up an entire *Magnolietum*, all specimens guaranteed to survive as far north as Michigan.

Another Washington entity, the Smithsonian Institution, has become a mecca for Washington visitors and one of the reasons for its immense popularity and success in drawing crowds that cover the entire social spectrum, is its working system for receiving gifts contributed by some citizens and displaying them conspicuously and conveniently for maximum enjoyment by others. There should be places with *Magnolia* plantings spectacular enough to draw more Americans and foreign visitors to see these majestic flowering trees, and among such places it seems proper that the National Arboretum should be the most preeminent.

Dr. Creech is an experienced and savvy civil servant who has found the demands of bureaucracy not incompatible with a distinguished career of plant