

# China and Magnolias Today

by Dr. August E. Kehr

China is the native home of many of our finest Magnolias, including *M. hepata* (*denudata*), *M. sprengeri*, *M. cylindrica*, and the elusive *M. biondii*. For this reason, on my recent trip to the Peoples Republic of China, it was understandable that I kept a sharp lookout for trees of Magnolia species, even though the primary purpose of the trip was in no way related to plants of ornamental value. Despite this, a few notes and impressions may be of interest to Magnoliaphiles.

For the present the Chinese place top priority for their time and efforts on plants with food or herb value. This goal is understandable because self sufficiency is the key word throughout the country, in industry as well as in agriculture. Each city and province has been given the responsibility of filling all its own requirements in consumer needs insofar as feasible. Hence botanists and botanic gardens must justify their programs on the basis of meeting the drug and herb needs of the surrounding population.

Work with "non-food" objectives must be sublimated to that of direct utilitarian nature. Thus maintenance of ornamental plant collections as well as collecting of new ornamental plants is either not done, or if done, must be at such a low key as to be essentially ineffective. It is not probable that significant exchanges of collections of ornamental plants will be made until the basic food needs of the country are met. However, with the rapid strides now being made to meet the food needs of the robust population, estimated at between 800 and 900 million people, it is possible more attention could be turned to efforts on ornamental plants in the next five to ten years. Although there are shortages of wheat and meat, the age-old problem of starvation has been overcome.

In the plantings in many of the cities, especially around the parks and better hotels as far north as Beijing (Peking), large numbers of *Magnolia grandiflora* were found. Judging from the height of some of these trees, many could have been over 30 years of age. However, thousands of smaller trees only a few feet high indicate how extremely popular this American introduction is in China.

A rather extensive planting of *M. grandiflora* is growing on the grounds of the Nanjing Hotel in Nanjing (Nanking). Several of these trees have *M. denudata* sprouts growing from the rootstocks. The use of such a scarce and beautiful Magnolia as a rootstock would appear to most of us as almost a travesty. One might assume also that *M. denudata* would be found growing widely in China. In my trip—which covered the area Beijing to Shanghai to Guandong (Canton) on the east to Xian (Cian) and Guilin (Kweiling) on the west—I saw only two trees of *M. denudata*, in front of the Peking Hotel, and a few trees in a nursery near Jinan (Tsinan). Hence, in my experience, *M. denudata*, compared to *M. grandiflora*, was rare.

Although my travels took me by train and motor car through many miles of

Shensi, Honan, Hopei, and Anwhei Provinces (all important areas for *Magnolia* species), I saw no other *Magnolia* species. It must be added, however, that our travels for the most part did not take us to the higher elevations. One should not expect to see *Magnolias* at lower elevations.

I should like to add one encouraging note to the above China travels. Those members of the American *Magnolia* Society who attended the meeting April 1-2 at the National Arboretum in Washington will recall a talk by Dr. Yu-Chen Ting, who returned to his home in Honan Province in 1976 for the first time in nearly 30 years. Dr. Ting was unsuccessful in 1976 in locating sources of *Magnolias* (especially *M. biondii*). We are glad to report that Dr. Ting returned to Honan in 1977, leaving on July 31, and will once again search for *Magnolias*. He will be in China for six weeks, returning to the U. S. in mid-September. Hence he will be in Honan at an ideal time to collect ripe seed. He has made arrangements with staff people of Honan University at Chengchow to collect *Magnolias* on Fu-Niu and Chikung Mountains, where *M. biondii* has been reported as growing. We have passed on to Dr. Ting instructions from President McDaniel on packing and mailing seeds and cuttings. Dr. Ting is very interested in this project and is most hopeful that he can succeed in 1977, or soon thereafter, in introduction of *M. biondii* into the West. We wish him success.



This picture shot by Dr. Kehr in Nanking, China shows *Magnolia grandiflora* scion on *M. heptapeta* (*denudata*) understock, from which sprouts are emerging.