

# Picking a Winner

So you've got a new *Magnolia* that has branchlets laden with glorious, jewel-like flowers of a splendor of color, size, and texture almost unbearable; that deserves perpetuation from here to infinity; that, if there is any justice left in this world, ought to become the admiration and envy of gardens far removed from your own narrow confines of earth.

You raised it as a seedling, from seed supplied by a friend, a seed company, the Society's seed counter, from one of your own trees, or from the wild. You know or believe you know something of its pedigree, whether its pollination was controlled or "open" and whether it's a species or hybrid.

You have chosen it for your tender care and attention and now it has crowned your efforts with insurpassable glory. Now, how do you go about seeing that others benefit from your work and that the tree's fame (and yours) is perpetuated?

Elsewhere in this issue Dr. John M. Fogg, Jr., the little engine that could and did keep chugging some years ago until a number of persons with a special fondness for *Magnolias* were formed into the American *Magnolia* Society, tells what you should do next. Jack Fogg, who is director of the Barnes Arboretum at Merion, Pennsylvania, also serves as the Society's registrar of named *magnolia* cultivars, a function set up a few years ago for reasons he explains.

To be registered, a *Magnolia* cultivar must first be selected and a name proposed. This protocol is intended to make sure that naming and registration is done by the book, ending some of the confusion of the past when one plant got several names or several plants one name or some other loose living arrangement aroused the frowns of polite horticultural society.

But there is no mention in the article of the criteria for selection—the reason for all the attention in the first place; this is left entirely to the judgment of the registrant. It's still a free country. This said, there still are a few things that should be considered by anyone who proposes to name and register a new *Magnolia* cultivar.

Selection means something picked out from a crowd, for whatever reason—size or substance or shape or color of flower, cold hardiness, season of bloom, size or

compactness of tree, ease of propagation, or some combination of these or other traits. In plant breeding, when the breeder starts to select plants for naming (or for further breeding), he may have several to several hundred to look at and pass judgment on.

*Magnolias* are trees or large shrubs, and the number of individual plants a breeder can grow to maturity to make a selection is limited by the amount of ground he has to devote to this purpose and the number of years he can wait for such character essentials as flowers to evince themselves. Therefore, selecting *Magnolias* is more difficult and slower and subject to more uncertainties than selecting most types of flowering plants, of which many grow in beds by the hundreds and may reach maturity and produce flowers all in the same season the seeds were planted.

A breeder compares the plants he has bred with other named plants in cultivation that he knows, or knows of, to try to make sure that what he selects will have characters that make it different from the run of the garden and, he hopes, truly better in some way. In the case of plants that are quite similar, if he cannot actually see the named counterpart and his own plant side by side, his choice is difficult and must perforce be based on descriptions provided by others or by photographs.

This kind of selection was even more difficult in the past, when descriptions or drawings or photographs of other plants were not readily available. Some *Magnolia* experts today have reached the considered opinion that many *Magnolias* have been selected and named in the past when they really were not distinctive or outstanding enough to be so honored. Many cultivars selected and named in the past have, over the years, apparently disappeared from cultivation and growers' catalogues and all we have left are names and sometimes descriptions in the literature. Some of these may have disappeared because they were not sufficiently outstanding or distinct from other cultivars to attract gardeners or growers on a wide basis.

*Magnolia* breeding today is limited by the space the average breeder can give to growing trees to maturity for selection, but today's breeder can use checklists and other descriptive sources and photographs to provide reasonable certainty that the *Magnolia* he selects for naming and

registering is truly different and has something of its own to offer the gardener.

The breeder, in selecting his plant for naming and registering, should check as thoroughly as he can to verify that his plant has differences and characters that make it outstanding. It's even worthwhile to show the plant or flower or both to other experts for their suggestions, or even to distribute propagated specimens of the plant to consultants so they can grow it themselves and then pass on their judgment and their experiences to the breeder.

Even having a glut of beautiful Magnolia plants available from which to make selections can present difficulties. Every spring for the past few years Society President Joe McDaniel and other experts have examined the hundreds of so-called Gresham hybrids (mostly *M. × soulangiana* 'Lennei Alba' × *M. × veitchii* and *M. liliflora* × *M. × veitchii*) at Gloster Arboretum in southwest Mississippi, where they have been planted several years and where, each year, a number start to bloom for the first time. There is such an embarrassment of riches that even these experts are hard put to pick out the best of the best of this hybridization series. The number of selections have to be kept to some sensible figure because many, though unquestionably beautiful, are quite similar in appearance or other characters, being, after all, siblings. Making a great many such cultivars available from this original breeding would simply dilute the demand for each.

The time is not past when a breeder can plant one seed and produce a Magnolia of such singularity that it would be truly deserving of "selection," naming, and registration. But alas the odds are against producing a Magnolia better than that which a breeder can select from the many, many plants or individuals he has seen. The Magnolia grower who believes his tree ought to be named and registered should check around, consult every source available, and get advice from as many experts as possible before making his decision or selection. In this way he may help assure that the plant he selects for honoring will be truly superior in every way, and is still likely to be around in gardens everywhere when a tree that had less to offer has long ago passed out of cultivation and been forgotten. Producing a winner is more than just growing it. You need to make some objective judgments that will hold good for the future.

## The Windup, The Pitch, And (We Hope) the Strike

In this issue, *et seq.*, we plan to carry a little box telling of two important membership activities or benefits—the Society's Seed Counter and its Pollen Bank—and the Round Robin letters among members whose comments concerning Magnolias won't wait for the next issue of the *Magnolia Journal*.

This standing information is mainly for those seeing their first issue and wanting to know what the Society is all about. It's our hope that every idle copy of *Magnolia* will be placed deftly in front of nonmember Magnolia lovers so that they can no longer avoid seeing it and becoming consumed by curiosity about what we're up to, and then be compelled by sense, sensibility, and a little devil-may-care to throw in with us.

Some years ago—not too many at that—I discovered that an organization calling itself the American Magnolia Society had, to my chagrin existed in utmost secrecy for several years. Soon I was holding a copy of the Society's publication—and a beauty it was—with my name and several others listed as new members. The deed was done and reasonably painless. The money part came (with the Christmas bills) later.

## The 'Jere' Clone

• In *Magnolia heptapeta* (*denudata*) there are different clones and the one commonly available in this country too often, in less favorable locations, fails to do its best. Wada's 'Japanese Clone' is a Yulan that vegetates and opens its buds enough later than the common clone for it to be usually more satisfactory under our climactic conditions. It is just as beautiful. Therefore, it is a better clone to propagate for any nursery selling Yulan in this country generally. I should add that we have an approximately 70-year-old *heptapeta* tree in an Urbana cemetery which fits the 'Japanese Clone' in appearance and performance. This, which I call 'Gere' clone (from the name on the nearest tombstone), opens later than the ordinary *M. × soulangiana* trees in the same section of the cemetery. I have grafted (chip buds) from the 'Gere' tree onto branches of an old 'Lennei' tree, and it blooms about the same time there. This is the pollen parent of my 'Pristine' hybrid.

—J.C. McDaniel, Round Robin Letters