

A Cry of Alarm

by Sir Peter Smithers

When this garden was planted in the years from 1970 to 1972 it was possible to obtain from nurseries in Britain a splendid selection of Magnolia clones, and we now have growing here, with later additions, about 150 of the best of them. These young plants represent mainly the generations of work carried out in the great gardens of Britain in the first half of this century, with later additions from the work of Todd Gresham in the U.S.A. and Felix Jury in New Zealand. In this distinguished company few if any of the old *Soulangina* hybrids are worthy of a place, splendid though they are, and they have been for the greater part eliminated in favour of the better Gresham and Pickard introductions. The last of them will probably go in the next few years: 'Lennei,' 'Lennei Alba,' 'Brozzonii' and other old friends of the horticultural mass trade.

Yet today it would be impossible—not difficult but impossible—to assemble a collection of the finest forms of *M. campbellii*, *M. sargentiana robusta*, *M. sprengeri* and their hybrids from commercial sources, while the new generation of Gresham and Pickard introductions is not yet available, and there is little sign that they are likely to become so. The reason for this state of affairs is no mystery. The great gardens where anything from three to thirty gardeners were able to maintain a private breeding programme in plants that might not show a flower for twenty years, have one by one succumbed to high taxation and inflated labour costs. Even the thousands of good gardens

which employed one to three gardeners have virtually disappeared, and with them the very serious and distinguished nurseries which served them. The Treseder Nursery went out of business last year and with it disappeared the most prolific and dedicated distributor of the great magnolias of the *campbellii* family.

Now only Hillier retains a substantial list of Magnolias, but their availability is uncertain and their number much reduced. So far as I know, however, there is no source of commercial supply in any other country which even approaches Hillier's reduced capacity. Whether Hillier can continue to carry a list of these plants in considerable variety as well as furnish a range of trees and shrubs covering the entire spectrum of temperate horticulture is, I should imagine, open to doubt. Therefore, it seems to me urgent to take steps to perpetuate the clones which are the fruit of breeding on a time scale which we cannot hope to repeat, and to introduce as quickly as possible the newer Magnolias which still for the most part are hidden in a few specialist private gardens.

With this in mind, one naturally thinks of preservation of the type trees in their original locus. Alas, this is often not possible in a world in which old gardens are frequently destroyed, and in which accidents happen.

There are, then, only two means of safeguarding the heritage of the golden age of gardening in the Magnolia family: distribution in the horticultural trade and distribution in public

institutions. The horticultural trade can hardly be expected to be too enthusiastic about selling plants which take many years to flower, such as the *campbellii-sargentiana* group and its hybrids, so their best hope is in institutions. But the instant-blooming Greshams and Pickards, and Mr. Jury's instant-blooming 'Iolanthe' and 'Serene,' ought to receive widespread attention from the trade. Nevertheless, the Dutch nurseries continue to churn out indifferent Soulangianas for the Garden Centres, and in all probability the same is the case in the U.S.A.

With this in mind, I have during the last few years been sending out scions from this collection. In Japan, through the intermediary of Dr. Shuichi Hirao, a good selection has gone to Mr. Nakamura, who has himself raised and selected a number of soulangiana-type hybrids of superior quality. A similar selection has gone to Oz Blumhardt in New Zealand, and large numbers of clones have been sent to Gerry Hetzer at Little Lake Nursery and Ken Durio at Louisiana Nursery. Mr. Nakamura succeeded with most of his propagations and we are now replacing all those he lost and adding some more. I have no report of progress from the other three, but a new batch goes off to New Zealand later in the autumn, to Mr. Blumhardt, at the Koromiko Nursery. In addition Herman Grootendorst from the nursery of that name has been down here to take propagations for his own extensive collection, but of course Holland is not an ideal climate for anything but the hardiest Magnolias.

With institutions—and that is to say essentially with the *campbellii-sargentiana* group of plants and the newer introductions—not much progress has been made. The Royal Horticultural Society's Garden at Wisley have agreed to graft a number of clones, and I am awaiting their 'wants list.' My list of plants was sent to the National Arboretum in

Washington, D.C. with an offer of any material they needed, but the letter and list elicited no reply. The municipal garden at Nantes in France, which has an extensive collection of Magnolias, was sent a quantity of scions last year and are seriously interested in improving their already good array of these plants. That is about the total achievement in this field so far as I am concerned.

It seems likely to me that the members of this Society have between them in all probability 99 percent of the world's finest Magnolia clones. If we all contributed scions to some central point or points, it would be possible to establish a permanent genetic store for future use and distribution. The Gloster Arboretum, which already has most of the Gresham material, would be an ideal location climatically for this purpose, but no doubt questions of finance arise, as well as problems with the cultivation of the plants. It would require one person working half-time to maintain the plants in proper growing condition: Magnolias, until they are fully grown, require some attention.

So far as I am concerned I must make it clear that with only half a gardener to help me, I cannot engage in a distribution program to all comers: but I am happy to continue to supply any material needed by the persons mentioned above as already in receipt of it, or to send material to an institution prepared to act as a central distributor. I must myself express my warmest thanks to Mr. Blumhardt, Mr. Nakamura, Ken Durio and the Hetzers for kindly sending me so much valuable clonal material. The 'old boy network' amongst a few specialists is certainly valuable. I am also much indebted to my neighbor Otto Eisenhut, nurseryman, who seems to possess a magic knife with which he can make almost anything grow upon almost anything at almost any time of year.