

Iolanthe: A Preliminary Evaluation

by Sir Peter Smithers

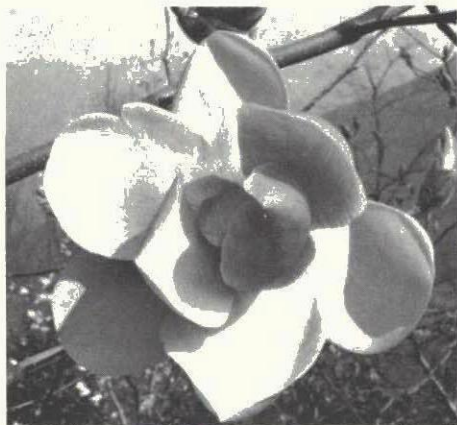
'Iolanthe,' raised by Felix Jury in New Zealand, first flowered with him in 1970 when four years old. The blooms were larger and lighter in colour than those of *M. × soulangiana* 'Lennei.' (Treseder p. 159). The parentage is \times 'Mark Jury' (*M. campbellii* Lanarth group \times *M. sargentiana robusta*) \times *M. × soulangiana* 'Lennei.' The report of such precocious flowering from seed, combined with the parentage, raised hopes that here at last we might have an "instant"-blooming Magnolia with the characteristics of the great tree species such as *M. campbellii* and *M. sargentiana*. However, preliminary comments emanating from New Zealand were not particularly enthusiastic, indicating that this was just another pink. The following note attempts a preliminary evaluation of the performance of 'Iolanthe' in this mild sunny and rainy climate.

Andrew Treseder sent me a graft of 'Iolanthe', made the previous year, in April 1978. It was a single stick about 15 inches high, and was immediately planted in open ground. During 1978 this plant threw a single unbranched growth and at the end of the season stood at about 4 feet 6 inches in height. During 1979 the plant put on another 3 feet 6 inches in growth and made numerous lateral growths, assuming a widely pyramidal shape. At the end of the season two large hairy buds were formed. In 1980 both buds for some reason rotted before swelling, and dropped off, something which I have never before seen on any Magnolia in this garden. The tree put on another 3 feet 9 inches of growth and increased the growth of the

laterals. At the end of the season it was a rather massive plant, 11 feet 9 inches high, and showed numerous bloom buds. When danger of snow was over in the spring of this year the stake was removed and the plant stood by itself.

The photographs which accompany this article, if the editor is able to find room for them, will give a better idea of this Magnolia than a description. First of all, its strong apical dominance and thus its ability to make a rigid central stem are strongly reminiscent of the *campbellii* grandparent. The carriage of the blooms, bending slightly sideways on the branches, recalls the *sargentiana robusta* parent. The very large unopened buds and extremely hirsute perules recall the *campbellii* grandparent in the Lanarth group.

The flowers give the impression of great size, as may be seen from the comparative picture of a number of other Magnolias which were in bloom at the same time. But this is less due to their diameter, which is between 10 and 11 inches, than to the massive size of



Magnolia 'Iolanthe'



Carriage and size of flowers of M. 'Iolanthe' (to author's right) are evident.

the flower parts. For a comparison one might point out that in absolute diameter the Gresham brunette 'Royal Crown' often achieves a similar diameter but with much narrower flower parts. There are nine petals. There is also a marked tendency to a cup-and-saucer effect at certain stages of development.

As for the colour, it is a good pink approaching the pink of 'Forrest's Pink.' But it is definitely not in the class of *M. campbellii* or *M. sprengeri* in their better forms. However, it must be said that the general effect of the small young tree carrying between 45 and 50 enormous blooms drooping under their own weight had a staggering effect upon beholders!

Mr. Treseder tells me that all three of the plants of 'Iolanthe' which he grew in Cornwall perished in the cold winter from an apparent inability to ripen their growths. This may perhaps give us a warning that the plant is not

particularly hardy, though my plant has passed temperatures of - 12 C for short periods on several occasions.

To sum up, therefore:

1. 'Iolanthe' is an extremely rapid grower, probably of treelike form and proportions, and probably not a plant for the smallest gardens.

2. She is an eager and very precocious bloomer.

3. The flowers have the size and much of the quality of the great tree Magnolias, but the colour, though good, is not of the same quality as that of the tree Magnolias in their best forms, nor is it as dark as the 'Lennei' parent.

4. The hardiness of 'Iolanthe' remains to be proved.

This amounts to a giant step forward in Magnolia breeding, and a plant which should be in the "first six" of Magnolias to be planted. For those in the second half of life who look upon the future of a newly planted *campbellii* with some misgivings, it is of course a "must." We have growing in this garden Mr. Jury's next experiment in this line: 'Serene.' In this the 'Lennei' parent has been replaced by *M. liliflora*. To date it does not show the same vigour as 'Iolanthe,' but is growing well. Clearly what is now required is a plant with the growth and constitution of 'Iolanthe' and the flower colour of *M. sprengeri* v. 'Diva': "instant Diva" in fact. Unfortunately in this garden 'Diva' had a bad start and is still some years from flowering.

I hope that the foregoing notes may evoke some reports from growers of 'Iolanthe' in the U.S.A. and New Zealand.

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