

## The First Dozen Years

by Peter Smithers

Some readers of *MAGNOLIA* will recall progress reports on the experiment, begun here in 1970, of planting magnolias on a steeply terraced slope at a spacing which would result in their eventually forming a closed canopy or overstorey, with an understorey of camellias, rhododendrons and other suitable lower-level shrubs. The canopy has now closed in a number of places, even with the spacing of the plants at centres of about 21 feet. This is, of course, a testimony to our mild warm and rather humid climate, but after 12 years experience certain lessons have been learned and it may be worth setting out some of them.

First, the success of canopy planting depends on the site. The house terrace overlooks our steep slope from above. A photograph in *MAGNOLIA* for fall 1979 shows the bare site as it looked in 1971 with the magnolias so small as to be scarcely visible, and gives a good idea of how the house dominates the site. If the house had been set in the middle of the planting on level ground, we would now see few blooms without resort to a helicopter.

The magnolias themselves clearly like growing in community. As they have developed and begin to embrace one another, they have become much less susceptible to desiccation or damage from wind. Meanwhile we have begun cutting out lower branches to make tunnels along the terraces for access, and in the hot summer weather these shaded alleys are delightful places to

stroll to examine the trees. The understorey plants also have been successful. The camellias and rhododendrons receive the full benefit of sunlight, broken only by the bare twigs of the magnolias, until blooming time for the latter. Thereafter they receive an increasing amount of shade as the leaves develop and the plants grow. This seems to suit the camellias to such an extent that one or two have had to be restrained from an evident desire to outgrow the magnolias. These cases are not in deep shade, but where there is still ample light at all seasons.

The rhododendrons have been more difficult. They much disliked the strong sun of the early years. In addition they have been heavily attacked by the deadly honey fungus, *Armillaria mellea*. Now that the shade is deepening they seem much happier. Perhaps I should add that the rhododendrons used have been the somewhat tender modern hybrids of English breeding, and not the bone-hardy plants favoured on the eastern seaboard of the U.S.A. for climatic reasons. Our calculation was that the hardy hybrids would not go on blooming satisfactorily in deep shade. The tender hybrids, *loderi* and so forth, bloom away happily under the magnolias.

Now that the trees are well away and the understorey established, we've turned attention to the 'forest' floor and are trying out numerous herbaceous and bulbous plants. The

English bluebell (*Scilla nonscripta*) together with the other ingredients of the English spring woodland scene, the primrose (*P. vulgaris*) and the wood anemone (*A. nemorosa*), seemed an obvious beginning. But although the primroses and anemones, both wild plants here, are spreading happily, the bluebells clearly will not do so. Other forest floor plants succeeding very well are hepaticas, cyclamen spp., hellebores and, in the still sunny spots, peonies. All are native plants, and the obvious lesson is to start out with decorative natives, before going on to exotics. In the latter our main success has been with various aroids. Here, however, one must be discriminating, for some aroids which look deceptively like shade-lovers are really creatures of the sunshine. In fact, as the magnolia woodland matures it will I think become an interesting 'system' of plants on a hierarchical basis, a spoofed-up piece of natural creation.

There have been some unexpected dividends, and one, surprisingly, is paid to the ear! I had not appreciated the enormous volume of leafage which would result from the very large foliage of most of the magnolias concentrated together. The result is that when there is even a modest shower of rain, a splendid roar like a tropical rainfall, arises from the trees below. As I lie in bed in the night I greatly enjoy this: but then, I like the wet tropics.

Over the 12-year period we have of course gained much experience of some of the 150 species and cultivars now growing here. Some earlier judgments have been modified and others confirmed, while in the case of the great magnolias of the Campbellii complex it is still much too early to say anything, although they are now beginning to flower quite well.

A first lesson is that one or two magnolias are not suitable for this kind of planting. The wonderful *M. × wieseneri* (syn. *watsonii*), which fills the garden with fragrance for weeks after the main blooming is over, is too open

and straggling in growth for canopy planting. I have been given an 'upright' form by Dr. Van Veen, and it may be that this could be satisfactorily grown into a tall specimen, but I doubt it. I also think that the very large-leaved magnolias, *M. hypoleuca, acuminata*, etc., are better planted in their community at much wider spacing, and we are beginning to develop a small planting of this kind. The main planting, then, consists of plants of the section *Yulania* and their hybrids, and of these the following seem to be indisputably of outstanding merit.

**Soulangianas.** 'Burgundy' for brilliance of display has far outshone any other Soulangiana. It has grown into a round-headed dense tree, so full of brilliant deep pink blooms each year that nothing else is visible. It is also very hardy and the blooms are weatherproof. 'Grace McDade', which produces what is arguably the most beautiful bloom in this section, has proved somewhat disappointing in growth, inheriting the bad qualities of 'Lennei' in that respect.

**'Picture' and its derivatives.** The origins of 'Picture' are still shrouded in mystery, but it is a magnolia of surpassing magnificence when fully grown. It is not, however, strongly apical-dominant, and in consequence is disinclined to grow into a large treelike form. Curiously enough, its two descendant strains, the late Mr. Wada's two selections and Mr. Pickard's  $F_2$  seedlings, are both strongly apical-dominant and show every intention of making quite vigorous, tall trees. The two Wada seedlings growing here, 'White Giant' and 'Superba,' are both rampant growers with very large flowers showing little resemblance to 'Picture.' The form of the blooms is very elegant and can only be conveyed by a photograph, while the colouring has been selected for its delicacy (Japanese taste) rather than for its brilliance (Anglo-Saxon taste). It is still too early to evaluate these plants

against the competition but they promise to be outstanding.

Of the Pickard F<sub>2</sub> 'Picture' seedlings, 'Ruby' would probably qualify as the best magnolia yet evaluated here. Of rather rigid almost fastigate form and vigorous growth, it looks like making a tree. It is very floriferous, and the blooms are of faultless form, large, of the brilliant colour of 'Lennei' but with a shade more red, and with a slight picotee effect. As in 'Picture,' there is a fine contrast between the exterior and interior of the petals but the form is much better. As of today, if I had to live with only one 'instant' magnolia, this would be my choice. Several others of Mr. Pickard's raising from 'Picture' have bloomed and are promising, but 'Sundew,' one of our first plantings, is outstanding. At ten years from planting it now stands over 30 feet high and is still going up fast, a massive tree covered with well-shaped blooms from head to foot. It is by far the best 'creamy-pink' magnolia to mature here. 'Ruby' and 'Sundew' far surpass any other 'instant' magnolias in their respective colour ranges, though the newer Greshams are still to be seen.

**The Gresham Hybrids.** Our experience here is limited to the plants sent by Gresham in his lifetime to Hilliers. 'Royal Crown,' 'Sayonara' and 'Rouged Alabaster' all made a great impression upon me and upon visitors when first grown here, and still do so now that they and others of the same group are well developed. But in light of the introduction of a later generation of Gresham selections from the Gloster Arboretum and from Mr. Tom Dodd's nursery, one is tempted to feel that judgment should be suspended until we know more about these newer plants which, blooming for the first time some years after Gresham's first selections, probably contain more *campbellii* genes.

In the last two years, however, a surprise has been provided by 'Manchu Fan.' This almost pure white Gresham,

with medium-sized, very beautifully formed flowers, did not seem spectacular until it began to put on growth. It has now, however, grown extremely rapidly into a tall conical large-leaved tree, unmistakably challenging the position of *M. denudata* Japanese clone, as the best pure white with blooms of moderate size. If today obliged to choose one pure white 'instant' magnolia, I would be hard put to decide between the enormous bowls of 'Sayonara' and the elegance and splendid growth of 'Manchu Fan.'

'**Forrest's Pink.**' This most beautiful magnolia has to have a heading by itself, since its status is entirely uncertain. Is it the lost original form of *M. denudata* that flits through E.H. Wilson's writing? Oz Blumhardt (a New Zealand breeder), to whom I sent pictures of this Caerhays plant, thinks it is probably a 'Divi' seedling. Whatever the truth, it is to date the best pure pink 'instant' magnolia in this garden. Not only is the colour elegant, but the form of the medium-sized flowers and their carriage, are extremely beautiful. Of its growth and habit I can say little. At Caerhays it is said to be a large tree. Here it was set back in growth for some reason, two years ago. With a little encouragement from foliar feed it is now off again and growing with great vigour, and the setback in growth did not have an adverse effect on bloom.

'**Iolanthe.**' I evaluated this new second-generation hybrid from Mr. Felix Jury of New Zealand in MAGNOLIA of Winter 1981, and will not elaborate here except to say that the performance of this first 'instant Campbellii' in the flowering season of 1982, as well as its subsequent splendid growth, confirms that it is at present, so far as I know, unique amongst magnolias: an astonishing sight for such a young tree. Only the colour remains a little disappointing.

And now for a sorry story. Propagation of the great treelike

magnolias of the *Campbellii* complex, is a patient business, even here where they bloom in half the time needed in England. After a ten-year wait, my tree of *M. campbellii alba*, Caerhays, FCC, produced its first bloom, and it was an admittedly magnificent deep pink. *M. sprengeri* 'Claret Cup' and Chyverton 'Hawk' also bloomed and were not true. I have done my best to alert friends to whom wood of these plants was sent. Where stock cannot be verified for 20 years it is perhaps understandable that mistakes occur. But then, who will give me back the lost ten years?

To conclude on a more cheerful subject, foliar feeding continues to be brilliantly successful for me in establishing and developing young magnolias, provided that the feed is adequately formulated with trace elements. I will not repeat the material in an earlier MAGNOLIA on the results of using Murphy (now a subsidiary of Dow Chemical) foliar feed. But while in Florida last winter I was greatly impressed by the results achieved by a new foliar feed on hybrid hibiscus. This has been on trial here since March, and I like the preliminary results very much indeed. Key Plex 350 is "a formulation of essential micronutrients and alpha keto amino acids." The addition of urea nitrogen is suggested by the manufacturer. In fact the alternation of this product and Murphy's foliar feed, which contains nitrogen is probably an ideal combination, together with a six-month root fertilizer. The product is made for Morse Enterprises Ltd., 7800 Red Road, South Miami, FL 33143.

Magnolias  
and other plants  
Our Fall Catalog \$1.00  
**LOUISIANA NURSERY**  
Rt. 7, Box 43  
Opelousas, La. 70570  
Phone (318) 948-3696

## Ledvina Takes Over AMS Seed Counter

The American Magnolia Society's 1982-83 Seed Counter will be handled by Dennis Ledvina, who for the past couple of years has been helping Herb and Gertrude Trautman in their handling, storing, sorting and mailing of seeds for this important Society activity.

We wish to thank Herb and Gertrude Trautman for the many hours they spent on the Seed Counter for 1980-81 and 1981-82 to assure that members who ordered seed would receive them promptly and in viable condition. They have done an excellent job for a chore that receives little reward. Their expertise in their operation of a nursery has been reflected in the professional way they operated the AMS Seed Counter. Well done, Mr. and Mrs. Trautman!

Like the Trautmans, Dennis is in Wisconsin, and he reports that there and in Michigan a large crop of seed is being produced following excellent, frostless spring weather. Dennis said he hopes other areas also are productive so we can make 1982-83 the Seed Counter's biggest year ever.

He urges especially that all contributors to the Seed Counter send seed to him as soon as possible after collection from trees to avoid shipment during cold winter weather and so the crop can be sorted and catalogued, then stored for shipment in spring 1983.

Seed should be cleaned if possible. Soak seed in water until the pulpy outer covering is easily removed. Send the moist seed in plastic bags immediately after cleaning, and they will be stored in a moist, cool condition to await shipment to those who order them next spring. Don't use fungicides or fillers such as peat, Perlite, and Turface, all of which interfere with handling and counting. If you find that you are unable to clean the seed, send them on immediately without cleaning.

Some contributors in the past have