

Notes From Vico Morcote

by Peter Smithers

Writing about the behaviour of plants is a doubtful proposition at best. What happens in my climate, soil and exposure is only an indifferent guide to what may happen in somebody else's garden. And even here, nothing is necessarily true from one year to another. There may have been 'normal' weather in the Garden of Eden, but it no longer exists at the southern foot of the Alps. So the best I can do is to say what actually happens here, believing that this is more authentic and useful than what is so often given to the public: material copied from one book to another in a horticultural library by people who never grew or even killed the plant in question.

The summer of 1982 was on the dry side, and it was followed by a mild winter with hardly any rain and, ergo, warm sunny days right up to Magnolia flowering time in spring 1983. The result was curious — and annoying. The Magnolias compressed their flowering season into the shortest period I can recall, and bloomed in quite unpredictable order. *Stellatas* were overtaken and outshone by more spectacular large-flowered things, an unfair competition not prescribed in the rules. The quality of bloom was somewhat below standard and the colours abnormal, some paler than in previous years. *M. denudata* 'Forrest's Pink,' usually a star of the garden, was not worth turning one's head for. This is not to say that the overall show of bloom was other than a magnificent spectacle, but it could have been better — and longer. Now the spring rains have come — they failed last year — and this year it is less spring rain than a monsoon. Five weeks of almost ceaseless rain, and still going on at the

end of May. The growth, as a result, is simply magnificent, a lush tropicality that I never saw before in this garden. If we then get a good sunny autumn all should be well next season at flowering time.

When we first planted Magnolias, we were hypnotized by the magnificence of the individual blooms. As the trees have grown to maturity different criteria for evaluation have come into play: floriferousness, quality of foliage and, above all, habit. This last emerges as of supreme importance as the trees approach maturity. The notes below upon some Magnolias flowering here for the first or second time, are therefore only tentative, since it is much too early to assess the growth habit of such young plants.

'Garnet.' Mr. Pickard has registered all of his seedlings with the prefix 'Pickard's,' and he is quite right in saying that they should be described thus. However, for brevity, I shall leave it at that and use only the clone distinction. Mr. Pickard considered 'Garnet' to be his best dark seedling, but his harsh weather in Kent, England hardly gives a plant a fair trial. It was therefore with much interest that I awaited the flowering of 'Garnet' with 20 or so blooms this spring. Would it be better than the splendid 'Ruby'? Would it in fact surpass 'Ruby'? The answer to both questions is 'no,' for it is in fact quite different. The exterior of the petals is a solid colour of a redder shade than 'Ruby,' the picotee effect is absent, and the flower is a more symmetrical bowl-shaped bloom with very wide and, proportionally, perhaps shorter petals. For the gardener the message seems to be that this is a seedling of the greatest promise, which should provide a fine

companion to 'Ruby' and 'Opal,' but a year or two will be needed to see whether it has the statuesque structure of those two beauties, or the more compact and bushy habit of the sister PP7.

'Maime.' Mr. Pickard did not propagate and distribute this seedling, which he says is the only one of his raising which is really close to 'Picture' itself. 'Maime' has now flowered in this garden for three years, and is certainly a very fine Magnolia. It is distinct from 'Picture,' but after running several times from one end of the garden to the other (they grow at opposite ends) I am unable to decide just what the difference is. It will be necessary to wait a year or two to make up my mind whether this very fine Magnolia is an improvement on 'Picture' or not. My impression is that the colour is slightly less brilliant.

'Firefly,' 'Pearl,' 'Coral,' 'Pink Diamond,' and 'Glow.' All of these Pickard selections flowered here for the first time this year. On a first blooming, and in an abnormal year, it is impossible to come to conclusions in the absence of the kind of excellence clearly shown by 'Garnet.' My impression of all five is that the flower quality is excellent, but that at first sight only one of them is likely to prove sufficiently different from other introductions in the Pickard and Gresham ranges to merit propagation and distribution.

'Stardust.' This seedling was designated PK1 by Mr. Pickard, as opposed to PPn for all his 'Picture' seedlings, to indicate his belief that it had *M. kobus* blood. Not liking the bloom, he decided not to propagate it. He would have thought quite otherwise if he had seen it flowering for the second year in this garden! It is true that the individual flower is not particularly impressive: a white, with a minimal pink stain at the base, and long rather narrow petals reflexing in a

manner somewhat reminiscent of *M. salicifolia*. A medium sized bloom. But these are borne with the greatest profusion throughout the centre of the extremely vigorous and strongly branching plant, as well as in the usual way. The effect in the garden is quite striking, and as the tremendous growth and strong apical dominance suggest a fast-growing tree, here is a plant to watch for the future. As to its parentage, it certainly has some genes that are absent in the other Pickard seedlings, but whether they come from *M. kobus* — what, after all, is *kobus*? — I dare not guess.

M. stellata 'Norman Gould' FCC. And that brings me to another star of this garden which is now fully proved and found highly satisfying. The brief note in Mr. Treseder's book (p. 114) on this Magnolia indicates that it is a colchicine-induced polyploid seedling of *M. stellata* raised by Dr. Janaki Ammal when she was on the laboratory staff of the Royal Horticultural Society's garden at Wisley. I note Treseder's caution in the wording of what he writes, which leaves open the possibility of some hybrid element as well as the colchicine, but if there be such I cannot detect traces of it. In this garden when I saw the first very fast growth on 'Norman Gould' I feared it might be from the *kobus* stock. The plant had to be moved twice and was set back. When it flowered for the first time and produced what seemed to be a *kobus* flower of exceptionally fine quality it seemed for a moment that my worst fears had been confirmed. Then I reflected that as the plant stood but four feet high, it was surely no ordinary *kobus*, since that tree does not bloom here under 15 feet and seven years. In subsequent years 'Norman Gould' has grown into a dense small tree, fine in foliage and in flower, much as described by Treseder, and fully deserving the highest award in the