

M. Dealbata in Vera Cruz

by James Russell

In October 1983 I was staying at Jalapa in Vera Cruz state. Jalapa is at about 4,000 feet in a district seldom visited by foreign tourists and of a lushness remarkable for Mexico. Looking out at the endless rolling ridges of wooded hills and the green fields I felt much more as if I was in a grander and more magnificent Sussex.

This landscape is dominated by Cofre de Perote, rising to a height of 14,000 feet. The upper slopes here are mostly poor, volcanic soil and thickly pine-clad, but at the 4,000-foot level the soil is a sandy loam over clay and the woods here are largely deciduous in character. There are many species of oak, but perhaps the most dominant species is *Liquidambar styraciflua* with an undergrowth of *Carpinus caroliniana*. It is this predominance of species which are perfectly hardy in England which has made me interested in collecting a number of the oaks to try if they too will acclimatise.

One day Graham Pattison of the Instituto Nacional de Investigaciones Sobre Recursos Bioticos and who was kindly piloting me around, suggested that we go and look at the recently discovered colony of *Magnolia dealbata* at Coyopola, which is a small village some six miles off a secondary road, and we approached up a rough gravelly track. The first thing to be noticed near the village of Cetlalpan was a splendid oak, making a tree of some 45 feet with a wide spread: the leaves, apparently evergreen, were 7 to 8 inches long. Unfortunately in this magnificent wood and with single trees spreading along the slopes for a considerable distance, we discovered

only two acorns but these have both germinated.

We were now traveling on a fairly high ridge looking down on green fields with scattered coppices and woods beyond them, and then endless ridges clad with pines running away into the distance. We first saw the *Magnolia* on a steep ridge about a mile short of the village of Coyopola. Here the trees had been coppiced and were coming up strongly from the base. The leaf appears much stronger and firmer than *Magnolia macrophylla* and, in fact, reminded me very much of the Chinese *Magnolia delavayi*, despite the fact that the plant is deciduous. One tree in this coppice had a fruit on it; with much manoeuvring with a long stick we knocked down six of the scarlet seeds. The trees here were grown with scrubby *Liquidambar* and *Clethra xalapensis* and various oaks.

A short way on we came to a fork in the road and a very steep, muddy slide led down to the village of Coyopola. Fortunately it was a fine sunny day and there was no rain that afternoon, otherwise I think the Volkswagen would have had considerable difficulty in getting out again. Coyopola is a cluster of wooden huts with a church painted a brilliant shade of blue. The huts were very small and each hidden in little plantations of fruit trees with thick hedges around them, and inhabited by people, dogs, chickens, turkeys and pigs. *Beschorneria yuccoides* was very common in the hedges here but none of the plants had any sign of their splendid rhubarb-red spikes.

Beyond was a common, with grazing horses and donkeys, and beyond that steep ridges with a meandering stream. This is still an area with considerable fields but vanishing in thick woodland mainly of *Liquidambar*. Here the

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