

# Some Problems Unforeseen

by Sir Peter Smithers

Several times in these pages I have drawn attention to the luxuriant beauty of magnolia foliage. It was 26th July, and in the early evening I was walking in the shade of the magnolias, which now cover our hillside with a canopy of splendid verdure.

It had been a hot day, and there had been no rain worth mentioning for six weeks. Some villages were without water, but we were lucky, and even the smallest of our young magnolias were long in growth. Beneath the shade of the older trees it was cool and refreshing. We had reached that point in the year when it was possible, for the first time, to foresee something of next year's bloom in the newly forming flower buds.

I reflected that I had never before seen such magnificent leafage or so much promise of bloom for next spring. Moreover, several exciting plants would bloom for the first time: 'Treve Holman,' 'Sulphur Cockatoo,' 'Maharancee,' *campbellii alba* 'Chyverton,' *campbellii* 'Landicla,' *sargentiana robusta* 'Chyverton' Dark form with just one precious fat bud. Others such as *campbellii* 'Darjeeling,' which this year carried its first two beautiful flowers, were now full of fine buds.

Our tree of *denudata* 'Forrest's Pink,' certainly one of the treasures of this garden, which a couple of years ago had been set back for reasons still not understood, and which last season formed altogether too many flower buds, had settled down and grown with the greatest vigour, carrying as well a normal complement of buds for the spring. A beautiful slender tree—perhaps a little too slender. I called Giovanni, my half-time gardener, and between us we fixed a tie fairly high up on the tree, with a wire to a

neighbouring structure at right angles to the direction of the prevailing wind, so that in a gale it might sway but would not fall. It carried a lot of leaf above the tie but I hoped it would not snap at the tie if—a highly unusual event—a strong wind should blow it hard against its support. We looked with satisfaction as we finished the work, and failed to reflect that pride goeth before a fall.

The fall came within minutes. As we reached the terrace we noticed with joy a few telltale spots of rain on the parched pavement. The communal water supply is a blessing, but no substitute for the rain from heaven. Then a few small hailstones bounced on the stones. This is a common enough phenomenon here, a nuisance which puts some small shotholes in the foliage and annoys me slightly for the rest of the season.

And then it began. The mountain towers above us behind the house and the garden lies below. Without the least warning, down the mountainside it swept. A howling, whirling devil-driven fury. The hailstones suddenly enlarged from pea-size to a size rather bigger than golf balls. Within two minutes as I watched, every magnolia was bent at 90 degrees before the torrent of ice. To go out in it would simply be to invite a cracked skull. Anyway, it was too late.

I watched as the ice projectiles smashed the double-thickness glass of the greenhouse where my *Nerine* breeding programme, one of the few in the world, is housed. Glass and leaves and branches were flying everywhere. The sound of crashing glass gradually diminished because there was not much left to break. The lawn was covered with large golf balls, almost hidden by them. Within ten minutes it was all over, and the sun, as though to add dimension to the diaster, for such it now was, shone serenely in the stillness.

My first instinct was not to go out until next day, but that lasted only seconds. My plants, in their agony, would need instant help. So, picking my way through glass and leaves and branches I went out. The wind had come from an almost unknown quarter, just the one I had gambled against when we put the wire tie on 'Forrest's Pink.' I could not quite face the situation, and put off doing so by getting my instant camera to photograph the golf balls. Doing so, I noticed that some of them, presumably coming from a greater height than the rest, had struck with such force that they had completely buried themselves in the hard turf.

Finally I walked to the terrace above the place where, half an hour before, the tree of 'Forrest's Pink' had stood in the pride of high summer. Averting my eyes from the place I looked in every other direction, and then with a wrench, looked down. Incredibly, the tree was there. At least, the structure, that thing which had taken a decade to build and which could not be rebuilt before very old age descends upon me, was intact. But as with every other magnolia in sight, nearly half of the leaves were gone, and broken growths hung from the framework.

An hour's inspection of the 150 or so magnolias growing here repeated the same story in every case. Savage damage, but we had not lost a single tree. This was important to us in our experiment of growing magnolias as a community, a "magnolia forest." If we had had isolated specimens growing upon sweeping lawns in the stately tradition, inevitably we would have beheld several of them lying on the grass. As it was, as in nature, they shielded and supported one another. But the loss of leafage and new growth and flower buds, as well as seeds already set, was savage. It would take days merely to clear the debris from the forest floor. The garden would be a misery to behold and to work in for the rest of this year.

After the immediate first-aid

measures, liberating trapped growth and re-tying young plants, what could be done to help my plants in their distress? The roots were in the full vigour of activity in late midseason. Now they were suddenly deprived of a high percentage of foliage through damage or total loss. The trees would be unbalanced systems. I wished I had the scientific knowledge to apply in such circumstances, but being only a gardener I must try the fruits of experience. If the leaf-surface was now far too small to do its work, what remained must work harder. Perhaps foliar feed would get more out of the remaining green. So out came the knapsack spray, and all smaller plants got a good wetting with a foliar feed rich in micronutrients. This would be repeated several times in the following month.

Nature anyway, has a wonderful resilience, and although the growing season was nearing its end, there might still be another month to go, with luck. Furthermore this involuntary, arbitrary and extremely drastic summer pruning might in fact stimulate new growth, particularly where young green wood had been broken clean off. Within a week it was apparent that this reasoning, aided perhaps by the foliar feed, was correct. From every smashed growth the highest bud was beginning to break into leaf. The miracle had begun, within a week. I felt that next year's growth would restore the undamaged main framework to its former glory, and only I would know what might have been.

But then came the second wave. I had not realised how much broken growth still remained on the trees, until at the end of the week the leaves began to shrivel where they hung. Furthermore, a close inspection of the bark revealed that where a projectile had scored a direct hit, even on large branches, much of the bark had been stripped clean from the tree, occasionally ringing and thus killing the branch.

Here it is comforting to note that