

# Yet Another Cautionary Tale

By Sir Peter Smithers

One of the most surprising events in the whole of gardening — and after 66 years of it I speak with some perspective — is the first flowering of one's very own tree of a great magnolia of the *Campbellii* complex. In England, 20 to 30 years: something hardly real in these days. But in this favored climate I am beginning to experience the thrill every year, as trees planted 12, 10, even 8 years show a first flower bud before the leaves are off in the autumn.

Looking for these buds in August has become a kind of field sport, exercised with binoculars, for usually that first notably fatter bud appears toward the top of the tree, probably quite a tall, leafy tree. Finding it is no easy matter, but one does not give up hope until all the leaves are down: only then, if nothing shows, one reflects that with any luck there will be next year.

*Magnolia campbellii* 'Landicla,' as all possessors of Treseder's book on Magnolias will realize even from the indifferent pictures in that splendid book, is one of the most beautiful of all the *campbelliis*, with perfect form and even in the Treseder picture, hints of a decent colour.

My tree was planted in 1975, and was given a very prominent place, just in front of the terrace so we can look it in the eye at about 25 feet height, where a mass of bloom was expected one day. We watched it year by year, and a full four years ago it began to form plentiful short spurs, just those growths on which one might see a first bud. There is a subtle change from growth buds to flower buds. In many of the great magnolias the growth buds are glabrous and the flower buds much more hirsute. When this change begins to be perceptible, it is a hint that the magnolia is at least thinking about

flowering. *M. campbellii* 'Landicla' clearly had thought quite seriously about flowering but had never quite got around to doing it. Then one day this past August I saw the unmistakable: the altered shape, the different carriage, the plentiful head of hair.

If it is usual for a first flower to be carried near the top of the tree, it is also usual for it to be solitary or one of two or perhaps three. With the passage of the years blooming gradually moves down until it occurs on branches sweeping the ground. I deplore my lack of scientific background, but it seems to me clear that the plant will not bloom while it is growing with the greatest vigour. Once it has attained a certain stature the growth slows down, the ripening of the wood improves, and doubtless chemical changes resulting from these things precipitate the beginning of blooming.

I have a plant of Mr. Pickard's *M. 'Schmetterling'*, a favourite with Mrs. Pickard, I believe. Well, it is no favourite of mine, for although in seven years it has grown into a substantial tree 25 feet high, it has never shown a single bloom. For a member of the "instant magnolias" group this is inexcusable. Mr. Pickard suggested that we bind the trunk with cords over plastic, drawing it tight, to reduce the flow of sap. This, he said, would precipitate flower. Well, I thought it might. Nonetheless, we have many magnolias to enjoy in this garden, and I preferred to let *M. 'Schmetterling'* go its way and reveal its natural behaviour. So far, I again see no sign at all of a bloom.

When next I looked at *M. campbellii* 'Landicla' I noticed a flower bud near the top of the tree, one I had not seen before. "More normal," I thought. Then I examined the tree minutely, and

to my astonishment I began to find flower buds everywhere. It would not be a question of a couple of flowers in 1985: we would have a full-blown display. My cup ran over, as it so often does in this garden full of wonderful plants bred by other people. I already envisaged the splendid spectacle, better far than the picture of a small plant in Treseder's book; I enjoyed in advance the astonishment of my friends and generally felt warm and comfortable all over. I did not for the moment associate this situation with Mr. Pickard's suggestion about *M. 'Schmetterling.'*

Some days later I was walking around the trees with my Wilkinson secateurs — a constant companion — snipping off obviously superfluous twigs from the interior of the plants. When I got to the base of *M. campbellii* 'Landicla' I — No, I could not believe it; it must be some appalling nightmare — there were, in several places, long dark lesions, which were wet with sap and on which the bark had already withered. In a flash Mr. Pickard's suggestion, the two hundred flowers on 'Landicla,' and the nightmare all rolled up into one. The mass blooming had indeed been precipitated by a restriction flow, but the agent was some diabolical bacterium or fungus, after these many weeks still not identified in the laboratory. Desperate efforts had to be made to save the plant if it could possibly be done.

An expert tree surgeon from Varese, Dr. Zanzi, came with a special rotary cutter and excised all the affected bark down to clean growth. The structure of the tree was still mechanically sound, only the bark having rotted. There were multiple lesions, some as long as three feet. All was then painted with anti-fungal paint. But Dr. Zanzi warned me that this was not enough. It was probable that antibiotics were

needed, and plant antibiotics are not available here.

An appeal to Dr. Frank Mossman, a member of our Society who was here last summer, resulted in the instant arrival from Vancouver, Washington, of two packets of agricultural streptomycin powder with instructions as to how to control pear flower blight and other horrors. No guidance could be got locally except that the stuff was very dangerous: a little in the eye might blind one permanently. Well, putting on a mask (which greatly frightened the dog), I made the prescribed mix, set the sprayer to "jet," and from a safe range splattered as much of the bark as possible. Then the Magnolia Mafia came up with another suggestion.

The J.J. Mauget Co. Inc. of Box 3422, Burbank, California 91504, was said to have a technique of auto injection of fertilizers and antibiotics. I had toyed with the idea of using the kitchen syringe for injecting the Mossman streptomycin, but found it mechanically impossible. This sounded like the answer.

I telephoned Mauget in California and Mr. Dodge there agreed to dispatch at once a set of injectors, enough for two trees, to the address given by the unknown voice at the other end of the line in Switzerland who, for all he knew, might be penniless. What arrived were two sets of capsules, one with Bayleton DEBC Mn 8 and the other with streptomycin sulfate, to be applied by auto injectors to the base of the tree at buttress level, the strep about 5 inches above the Bayleton, in healthy wood, three injectors of each. It was done at once, its application was simplicity itself, and now the injectors are injecting.

I look out of the window at some 200 flower buds — at least — on *Magnolia campbellii* 'Landicla.' When spring comes to the Southern Alps, will they be alive and strong enough to open? To be continued in my next.