

# Notes from Vico Morcote

by Sir Peter Smithers

The location of our 1986 meeting in Mobile meant that I would be able both to attend the meeting and to see my Magnolias in bloom afterwards. I seized the golden opportunity to meet the great men of the Magnolia world, so many of them known only by correspondence. As icing on the cake, there would be the Tom Dodd Greshams in bloom. Some years ago I had arranged to visit Semmes to see these and the Gloster Arboretum plants at flowering time, but I was telephoned a couple of days before the date of the visit advising cancellation. All the flowers had been frosted. It seemed unlikely that this would happen again.

Bill Dodd very kindly met me at the Airport. Somehow, I knew it before he opened his mouth: the Magnolias had all been frosted once again. It was against all probability, even against the law of averages, but it was true. I thought of the benign climate in which my Magnolias grew on Lake Lugano: never a frosted bloom in 15 years. I pitied those unfortunates who grow Magnolias in inhospitable climates such as Alabama. For a moment I toyed with the idea of suggesting that the Dodd Nurseries move to Lugano, but decided against the jest. It was probably not a subject for humour.

That night my suspicion that the nagging cold symptoms which had annoyed me for a couple of days, were really the 'flu, were confirmed. This was worse than the frost. I had promised to speak at the dinner and to show a few pictures, so retreat was impossible. Besides, I had hoped to make the personal acquaintance of so many prominent Magnolia specialists, above all of President

Ken Durio to whom I owe many kindnesses and much scion material. I confided in Dr. Frank Mossman, but that made matters no better when he gave me the interesting information that a cough can infect at a distance of 35 feet. What if I brought the meeting down with 'flu, dispersing it throughout the Magnolia world like some exploding chemical weapon? What fate would befall the Society member who infected our President? At the risk of being thought unsociable I decided to keep as far away from everybody as possible until the dinner. I managed to get through the dinner, to croak out a speech, and then took the next plane home and to bed where I remained for quite a time.

And there, outside my windows, were the buds of the Magnolias in their thousands, beginning to open in the benign climate of the Ticino. I thought of the Dodds, and Gloster and the Nursery at Opelousas, and felt truly sorry for them, felt almost guilty at my own good fortune.

It had been a quite exceptionally dry autumn in 1985, and whether or not for this reason, several *campbellii* type Magnolias which had flowered freely for some years, were without a bloom bud. But the remainder were very well budded and a splendid show was beginning. Magnolia 'Forrest's Pink' was covered head-to-foot, and a number of plants were to flower for the first time. There was, however, a tendency for all to open at once, and within a few days *stellatas*, what remain of the Soulanganias, and many Greshams and Pickards were all in flower together. They were just reaching peak bloom when our weather forecast, to my astonishment, warned of a night

frost. Our climate is so local that forecasting is difficult and I went to bed happily contemptuous of the warning. Next morning I awoke to a garden covered with snow and two degrees of frost. The snow clouds soon dispersed and a bright sun with a drying north wind beat down upon the flowers. Then the weather clouded again and rain began. It turned to hail, which though not at all heavy and lasting for only a few minutes, was enough to finish off what remained of the flowers. I thought of the Dodds and Gloster and the Durio Nursery, and realized that somehow I felt much happier than before.

From every misfortune in the garden there emerges some benefit. The extremely good resistance of *Magnolia x soulangiana* 'Burgundy' to bad weather is confirmed. Though close inspection of the blooms showed the damage, this was the only tree which from a little distance looked pretty good after the storm. The benefits of late flowering also were confirmed again. The late bloomers suffered much less damage. In the selection of Magnolias for planting in the garden, lateness of bloom is certainly an important advantage.

There were several exciting events, weather notwithstanding. Magnolia 'Star Wars,' received as a small graft from Os Blumhardt in July 1982, grew with the greatest vigour and in the autumn of 1985 formed 20 or so flower buds. This plant is *M. liliflora* x *campbellii*, selected, and then crossed back again to *campbellii*. It is thus 75 percent *campbellii*. The *campbellii* clone was that distributed by the Duncan & Davies nursery in New Zealand, the origin of which is not known. The *liliflora* clone was the relatively early flowering bright purple which is in commerce there. I am not an enthusiastic admirer of *liliflora* as a parent: what we want are clear *campbellii* pinks.

I was not therefore full of

expectations for 'Star Wars.' Also the flower buds last autumn were quite small and unimpressive. "A lot of little purple blooms," I thought to myself. But as flowering approached the buds enlarged to a prodigious size, then shed the perules and remained for a considerable time as tightly furled petals of a good bright *campbellii* pink. Then they burst into enormous blooms, opening in long succession. The young tree, now 15 feet high, is a beautiful regular shape, rather densely branched and promises an excellent habit. Os Blumhardt has thus managed to transmit from *liliflora* the instant-blooming characteristic while preserving the nice colour and strong growth of *campbellii*.

'Star Wars,' which received its name from the film of that name and not from the projected defence weapons, obviously invites comparison with Jury's M. 'Iolanthe.' The colour is that of a pink *campbellii* though still not up to the very best of that species. The whole appearance of the flower is quite different from that of 'Iolanthe,' the petals giving a more pointed effect than the rounded petals of the latter. Flowering was at three years from planting as a small graft against 'Iolanthe's' two, but when 'Star Wars' began it did so with a bang! The tree gives a more green and 'twiggy' impression than 'Iolanthe' at this stage, and Os states that it roots very easily from summer cuttings. 'Iolanthe' is only 50 percent *campbellii*, whereas 'Star Wars' is 75 percent. This may indicate that it will be less hardy in cultivation than the former plant. However, such deductions are unreliable, and it will be best to await wider planting before jumping to conclusions.

Flowering at the same time as 'Star Wars' was 'Galaxy,' which is *liliflora* x *sprengeri* 'Diva.' The flower of 'Star Wars' is a whole order of magnitude superior to that of 'Galaxy,' but then 'Galaxy' is

probably much hardier. The parent tree of 'Star Wars' in the Blumhardt nursery has not had full scope to develop, but Os states that it is now 25 feet high at about ten years from seed. My grafted plant looks as though it would be very much more than that ten years from grafting. All in all, this is clearly a very exciting Magnolia well worth taking a gamble on, even if its full capabilities and possible failings are not yet clear.

Another Magnolia to demonstrate its quality this year was 'Serene,' received from Os Blumhardt in 1980. It is *liliflora* x 'Mark Jury,' the latter being the Jury's *sargentiana robusta* x *campbellii* cross, growing here but still unflowered. 'Serene' has grown into a tall, rather sparse upright small tree and flowered in 1984 and 1985. It has inherited the lateness of *liliflora* and also a rather purplish none-too-exciting colour. It aroused no enthusiasm in me on first blooming. This year, however, it put on its first display, with a lot of flowers. The colour remains unconvincing, but the carriage and shape of the medium-sized flowers give the tree a very distinctive appearance which could not be confused with any other Magnolia: it would always be instantly recognizable at a glance. This is because of the short but broad rounded petals, carried rigidly in a cup shape, and held stiffly vertical, with none of the *sargentiana* carriage—looking sideways—which is a noticeable feature of 'Iolanthe.' I doubt 'Serene' will ever figure amongst the top ten Magnolias for the garden, but its lateness and its individuality place it fairly high on the list.

Readers may remember that my plant of Pickard's 'Schmetterling,' a 'Picture' seedling, grew with great vigour into a strong tree of 18 feet without flowering. Planted in 1979 it did not throw a flower until 1985, so on its performance here it does not

rank as an 'instant bloomer.' This year it put on a full display, an impressive head of tall flowers almost identical in colour to those of the Gresham 'Royal Crown' growing nearby. As compared with 'Royal Crown,' the strong influence of *M. liliflora* that is noticeable in the latter, both in its growth (a tendency to triple forks) and in its flowers (pointed petals), is much less pronounced. As the trees now stand, my preference goes to 'Schmetterling.' But unless its reluctance to flower young can be disproved by experience elsewhere, I am hesitant to recommend it except for large and patient Magnolia collections.

To return to the mystery of the fruiting of *M. x 'Wieseneri'* in this garden, one seedling of healthy but modest growth still closely resembles the parent plant. The others continue to grow with great vigour, far exceeding anything seen by me on *M. x 'Wieseneri.'* The shape and undersurface of the leaves resemble *M. hypoleuca* but are not identical and they vary slightly from plant to plant. Mrs. Polly Hill kindly sent me some photographs of her *M. 'Wieseneri,'* which has seeded regularly. It is difficult to come to any conclusion from the leaves of her plant as seen in the photograph, but the photograph showing a seed pod displays something quite unlike the narrow twisted pod carried by my plant. Her seed pod is a large rounded fruit very similar to that carried by *M. hypoleuca.* Meanwhile, Brooklyn Botanic Garden has been at work with the gas chromatograph on foliage from my seedlings, but that is a long and complex task which may or may not make possible a definite conclusion as to whether *M. x 'Wieseneri'* is a species or a hybrid, and as to the origins of my single fruiting. Either conclusion is compatible with conditions in this garden, where *M. hypoleuca* grows close to *M. x 'Wieseneri'* and flowers