

Notes from Vico Morcote

by Sir Peter Smithers

No longer do I correspond—officially—with Harold Hopkins as our Editor. For a good many years he was my editorial conscience. Sometimes I remember to write. Sometimes the rush of events in a busy garden pushed the article into limbo, waiting for that rainy day which when it came seemed to pass unnoticed. On such occasions a reminder from Harold took the form not of a demand for copy, but of a remark buried somewhere in a letter about other matters, which without actually drawing the picture, would conjure up the vision of a sorrowing, volunteer, unpaid, unpensioned and probably underfunded editor, suffering from my selfish neglect. It was, of course, a subtle form of thumbtwisting which was irresistible. Our association by correspondence over those years was, so far as I am concerned, an exceptionally happy one, and I would like to record my thanks to Harold for his skill and taste in serving out the raw meat which I delivered to him.

Seventeen years from the first planting of our experimental 'Magnolia Forest' the lessons of maturity are being learned. The canopy is largely closed, and the formerly sunbaked ground suitable for growing bearded iris, herbaceous peonies, dianthus and other sunlovers, is now deep shade under the heavy summer canopy of magnolia leaves. Gone are all the sunlovers. They have been replaced by woodland plants: ferns, aroids, some terrestrial orchids such as calanthes, and plants which flower before the magnolias are in leaf such as the many Japanese forms of *Adonis amurensis* sent to me by Mr. Nakayama through Dr. Hirao, spring

flowering bulbs and quantities of *Helleborus niger* in selected forms. But it is apparent that we are now due for an extensive new planting of this woodland material to fill the open spaces between the trunks of the magnolias.

The most serious loss, from an otherwise surprisingly successful experiment, was foreseen but is still regrettable. It is a deplorable habit in some arboretums to skin magnolias up to a head on a branchless trunk six to ten feet high, thus depriving spectators of the delight of viewing the cascade of bloom at eye-level. No spectacle exceeds in beauty that of a specimen magnolia in full bloom clothed with branches right down to the ground. This we knew we would sacrifice in order to create our closed-canopy woodland, though of course as we view the trees from the terrace above them, we see a staggering display of literally hundreds of thousands of blooms concentrated together, and as some of the older trees have grown up to terrace level we now look them in the eye at treetop height.

The alternative would have been to plant our site with a third the number of trees and to grow them as individual specimens. But of course there would have been drawbacks in this too. Much more work, in so far as it would have been necessary to maintain the ground between the trees, and a far less extensive collection. If it had been possible seventeen years ago to know precisely which magnolias to plant, this method could have been adopted with success. But the necessary knowledge was not then available, and in retrospect it is just as well that we did not gamble on a

'selection' instead of 'trial.' In the first place many of our supposed star performers turned out to be rogues. On the other hand, the real stars had not then been identified, and quite a number of established varieties have since been cut down as inadequate. In the light of experience it would now be possible to make a plantation of individual specimen trees, clothed with bloom to ground level. I think that my selection would be as follows in very approximate order of preference:

Instant bloomers—

Star Wars
Iolanthe
Burgundy
Forrest's Pink
Joe McDaniel
Sayonara
Sundew
Serene
Manchu Fan
Ruby
Brozzonii (latest of all)

Miscellaneous—

M. wieseneri Hooker f
M. hypoleuca
M. officinalis
Ballerina
Merrill

The great tree magnolias, *Ms. campbellii*, *sargentiana*, *sprengeri*, *dawsoniana* and all of their varieties and hybrids, flower only after a minimum of eight years and a maximum of seventeen in this climate. As so many of these were sent not true to name this trial failed lamentably. All that I can say at this point is that of those plants which were true to name I would not willingly be without *M. campbellii* 'Landicla', 'Princess Margaret' FCC, and alba [from] Chyverton.

Last season produced a curious phenomenon, already noted by me in these pages. A 'strike' by *Ms.*

campbellii, *sprengeri* and *sargentiana* which had previously flowered freely. Not a single bloom on many of them. I attributed this at the time to the intense drought during the mid and late summer period when flower bud formation takes place. This year, after a dry spring, we had plenty of rain in June and July, and all the trees are once again full of flower buds for next season. Next spring, in fact, will see the last of the earlier plantings of *campbellii* flowering for the first time. Will they be the real thing?

Another and different phenomenon presents itself this year. I am a beekeeper, and this spring five strong stocks were working hard in the fine weather which accompanied the reduced magnolia blooming. When photographing the magnolias I noticed that the flowers were fuller of bees than I had ever seen them. I presume that it is for this reason that the amount of seed set on the trees has been disastrous. The great quantity of very large heavy fruits combined with very rapid growth and heavy foliage in the rainy summer, has resulted in branches bowed down with the weight and in one case broken by it. Will they recover their correct posture after the seeds fall? Why not cut off the fruits? The trees are too tall and there are far too many of them for this to be feasible. I am hoping that this sexual orgy will not have effected the performance of the trees for next year. I plan to get rid of the bees. In any case, in this bumper year for seed, they failed to pollinate *M. wieseneri* successfully, though the flowers were full of them. Thus the single pod set on this tree some years ago remains the only recorded seed on Hooker's form of this plant. Meanwhile the seedlings from that pod continue to grow ferociously, and now stand about fifteen feet tall, without any sign of

flower. Their behavior is that of *M. hypoleuca*, which I believe to be the pollen parent.

The heavy set of seed, strong growth and heavy rain and wind resulted in a breakage on *M. × 'Sayonara.'* In an earlier season we also had a breakage on the sister clone *M. × 'Rouged Alabaster.'* In this garden *M. × veitchii*, one of the parents of both plants, was discarded after some years of growth, because it was disastrously wind-tender and clearly would never form a well-shaped tree for this reason. I am beginning to wonder, reluctantly, whether this defect may have been transmitted to some of its white-flowered Gresham descendants, though admittedly in a lesser degree.

A somewhat different phenomenon this year has been the unusual display of summer bloom put on by 'Star Wars.' Normally I regard summer flowers on spring-blooming magnolias as an offense. The flowers are off-color and under-size. Not so 'Star Wars.' The young plant produced a number of blooms of magnificent color and good size, though not so large as those of springtime. On the tree they looked lovely with the lush new foliage. It was, in fact, a very acceptable interim dividend, and yet another reason why I now regard 'Star Wars' as the best magnolia in this garden. No doubt the *liliflora* blood in 'Star Wars' encourages this second blooming. The same thing occurred on 'Royal Crown', 'Manchu Fan' and 'Forrest's Pink', but the quality of the blooms was poor. Now I must repeat the statutory caution! What I report is true for this climate, this garden and this year. I am not to be held responsible for what happens in some other garden in some other climate in some other year.

Finally, something not sufficiently

considered when I did my planting seventeen years ago. On the whole the trees have grown magnificently in this light fertile soil and usually benign climate. But now I see indications that the relatively thin covering of soil over the rock of the mountainside may perhaps not be adequate to support very large trees. Magnolias are not, I think, very deep rooters, but a large tree carries an extensive root system and transpires a great deal of water on a hot sunny day. I would feel more sanguine about growth in the next seventeen years if we had another few feet of soil beneath us. However, this is at present no more than a misgiving, and it may be that the steady build-up of humus from the fallen magnolia foliage will do something to compensate for a lack of depth. However, the rate of transpiration from a large tree obviously far exceeds anything which might be saved by a deep mulch, so that the benefits of the mulch are certainly confined to bacterial activity and the release of nutrients. Perhaps some artificial fertilization will ultimately be needed?

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