

Four Magnolias, Ho-No-Ki, from Japan at Barnard's Inn Farm

by Polly Hill

What is #64-025?

In the spring of 1964 I received from Dr. Tsuneshige Rokujo a plant labeled *Magnolia x watsonii* (syn. *wieseneri*) to which I gave the number 64-025. It was planted in my Play-Pen, location 29-S, where it still is. Twenty years later, in 1984, in reply to my inquiry, Dr. Rokujo wrote me that my plant came from Yamamoto's Nursery near Kyoto. He did not specify that it was a graft, nor does my record offer any information other than "bare root". But I believe that it may have been a graft.

In response to requests I sent scions to several members of the Magnolia Society. I have not yet heard of any success in grafting the scions. Seeds were also collected for 2 or 3 years, only a few seeds in each of very few pods, and these were distributed through the seed counter. Again reports were negative, there was no germination. About that time questions were raised concerning the identity of my #64-025. Some correspondence on the subject was published in several issues of MAGNOLIA.

On May 15, 1987, Dr. Frederick G. Meyer of the National Arboretum wrote me. I quote, "In the recent Magnolia Journal, there is an article about a plant you have of *Magnolia x wieseneri*, and what its identification might be. Could you make a pressed specimen of a flower with leaves...." This I did, and I am happy and relieved to have this reply, dated June 25, 1987. "...after comparing your specimen with

our material in the herbarium, I am convinced that it has nothing whatsoever to do with *M. x wieseneri*. After reading Sir Peter Smithers' remarks in the Magnolia Journal I do not hesitate in disagreeing with his decision to call your plant 'Hill's form' of *M. x wieseneri*. I think what you have is straight *Magnolia obovata* of Thunberg, a Japanese species I have collected myself in Japan." Later I sent Dr. Meyer a photograph of the flower and a seed pod nearly ripe. These supplied further confirmation of his opinion as first expressed. I am relieved at this outcome and appreciative of his help in getting this identification straightened out.

Magnolia obovata

Perhaps it will interest members of the society to mention three other plants of *Magnolia obovata* (syn. *hypoleuca*) now growing at Barnard's Inn Farm. In 1968 Dr. Rokujo sent me three small seedlings of *M. obovata* which I gave the number #68-004. Since one of them was eventually selected as superior and introduced and registered, I will briefly describe and compare these trees, all germinated in Japan. They vary greatly from each other, and from the number #64-025. All four are growing in the Play-Pen under similar conditions.

M. #64-025 is now 20 feet tall and narrow, with branches 4-5' long, growing horizontally and haphazardly from about 4' to the top of the tree, curving up at the ends. The largest of



M. obovata (hypoleuca) 'Lydia'



the three *M. obovata* in #68-004, in location 7-N, is now about 30' tall and loosely spreading, with branches 6-15' long. As a friend remarked, you could throw a cat through it. This one first bloomed in 1978 after 10 years from a 10 inch seedling. Its photograph was distributed in the Round-Robin. Dr. Joseph McDaniel sent this comment to me in the Robin letter. "Polly, you could do better." That was a very mild rebuke. He could easily have said that the flower was ungainly, or just plain ugly. That first to bloom tree in 7-N is the tallest, has the most blossoms, sets the most abundant seed, and is the least desirable aesthetically of the four.

The smallest tree of #68-004 is in location 22-N. It is only about 15' tall and has not yet bloomed.

There remains the middle sized tree in location 10-N, which is my selection and a great favorite. I suspect we have all experienced the observant visitor who notices something important we have missed ourselves, indeed this has happened to me more than once. In this case, Dr. David Leach first called my attention to the well-proportioned smooth oval habit of my *M. obovata* in location 10-N. The branches arise vertically and continue close to the trunk. I have named her 'Lydia', although she was not named at the time, not until she had bloomed and been observed by several more good horticulturists, and approved for flower and fragrance in addition to her shape. As I see it, *M. 'Lydia'* is a first rate, desirable tree for a small garden. Her tall straight stem is thickly branched. The 6-7 inch flowers have 3 pink outer tepals, 6 creamy white inner ones, and a rosy gynoecium. She blooms in June with a lemon fragrance. The straight

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trunk is smooth and pale and the tree has been pest free in my garden. Fruit aggregates are a rich maroon and distinctly ornamental in maturity. This charming tree is named for my youngest granddaughter.

Seed production is always a matter of interest to me. How do these four trees rate? The answer: very differently from tree to tree. *Magnolia* cv. Lydia, #68-004-01, first bloomed in 1983. In April 1987, I planted 30 seeds from 'Lydia' in my nursery, after stratifying them. Without counting I guess that there were 30 healthy seedlings up last summer. Those that winter should make perfect understocks for budding or grafting cv. Lydia.

Magnolia obovata #64-025 has produced very few seeds and those have not proved viable. I have been wondering if the nurseryman, Yamamoto, producing this plant by grafting *sieboldii* on *obovata* stock might have achieved only a partial "take", which might in turn have affected seed viability without altering the flower or fruit formation of the understock? I am no geneticist and should not speculate.

Unfortunately, there were no seeds from any of these trees available in the fall of 1987. There were only 1 or 2 flowers on any tree due to a late and disastrous big freeze on May 14th.

As a compensation for "losing" my #64-025, this autumn I planted a *Magnolia* x *watsonii* (*wieseneri*) from Wayside Gardens in my north field at Barnard's Inn Farm. Its number is #87-056. In 10 or 15 years there may be something to photograph that is truly *Magnolia* x *watsonii*, provided, of course, it survives the present sub-zero winter. ■