

# Magnolia campbellii ssp. mollicomata in Philadelphia

by DR. TIMOTHY STORBECK

If, as some suggest, gardening develops patience in its practitioners, then there is no greater teacher of this virtue than *Magnolia campbellii*. Despite recognition by some as the most beautiful and elegant member of the genus, one major obstacle hinders its widespread cultivation: the requirement for 25-30 years of growth before flowering. To the potential grower of the species, G. H. Johnstone<sup>1</sup> offers this caveat, "...those who would plant [*Magnolia campbellii*] must do so with the knowledge that unless they hope to have twenty-five years to live...their reward will be the gratitude of those who come after them." A secondary problem in the cultivation of this species is that it blooms very early in the season, making its flowers susceptible to frost damage. The cultural obstacles of typical *M. campbellii*, which is native to the Himalayan region of Nepal eastward to western China, are somewhat ameliorated in a subspecies from the eastern portions of the range. *M. campbellii* subsp. *mollicomata* reaches adulthood in a mere 10-12 years and, though still precocious, flowers later in the season than typical *M. campbellii* subsp. *campbellii*.

The collections of these plants that form the basis of the infraspecific taxonomy seem to represent only

the far eastern and far western portions of the species' full range. Consequently, the two subspecies have been depicted as fairly distinct entities. Most contemporary treatments of the species indicate that *M. campbellii* is far more variable than originally supposed. The principal morphological character that originally defined *Magnolia campbellii* subsp. *mollicomata*, the presence of hairs on the peduncle and stem nodes immediately below the inflorescence, is no longer considered valid.<sup>2</sup> Among the few consistent morphological characters that separate the subspecies are the size and shape of the terminal buds: oblong, to 2.5 inches, with an acute apex in *Magnolia campbellii* subsp. *mollicomata*; ovoid, to 1.5 inches, with a rounded apex in *Magnolia campbellii* subsp. *campbellii*.<sup>3</sup>

Two specimens purchased as *M. campbellii* subsp. *mollicomata* were added to the collection of the Arboretum of the Barnes Foundation in 1962, during the directorship of noted magnolia expert John M. Fogg. Sparse blooming in 1990 and 1991 has prompted taxonomic interest in these plants, since they appear to have some characteristics of both subspecies. Like *M. campbellii* subsp. *campbellii* the Arboretum's plants required over

twenty years to reach reproductive maturity. However, the plants bloomed during the first week in April, which is much later than expected for *M. campbellii* subsp. *campbellii* in the Philadelphia area.

Morphologically, the plants are also ambiguous. The peduncle and stem nodes below the inflorescence are glabrous, as in *M. campbellii* subsp. *campbellii*, but the buds are distinctly pointed as in *M. campbellii* subsp. *mollicomata*. Furthermore, the size of the buds is intermediate relative to the subspecies. Flower color is the pink of *M. campbellii* subsp. *campbellii*, not the rose-magenta of *M. campbellii* subsp. *mollicomata*.

There are at least two possible ways of explaining the suite of characters displayed by the

Arboretum's plants. Although they were nursery-grown, not wild-collected, they may represent the kind of natural variability found throughout the range of *M. campbellii*. Alternatively, they may be intentional or accidental hybrids or hybrid derivatives of *M. campbellii* subsp. *campbellii* x *M. campbellii* subsp. *mollicomata*.

#### References:

- <sup>1</sup>Johnstone, G. H. 1955. *Asiatic Magnolias in Cultivation*. The Royal Horticultural Society. London.
- <sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*
- <sup>3</sup>Treseder, N. G. 1978. *Magnolias*. Faber & Faber. London.

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### Notes from the Seed Counter

The 1991 Seed Counter raised about \$2200 for the Society. Over 2000 seed packs were distributed. Excess seed was sent to the Estonian Horticultural Society. Because of long isolation they are in dire need of new horticultural material.

My own tests with seed packets containing damp vermiculite resulted in much-improved germination. I learned from others that some seed types, such as *wilsonii*, need two periods of cold storage. Seed which did not germinate was therefore returned to the refrigerator for another two months. After the second cold period, most of this seed germinated. Try this technique next year for seed that does not germinate after one cold treatment period.

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Seed Counter Co-Chairmen

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