

A family of all stars

Larry Langford

Spring often comes suddenly to western Tennessee. Unfortunately, winter has a tendency to return just as quickly. After many trials and many failures with precocious magnolia cultivars that are not sufficiently bloom bud hardy, I finally concentrated on those magnolias that will perform, that is, bloom, on a regular basis despite the vicissitudes of weather. For me that has meant an ever growing collection of cultivars of Section Buergeria, especially those of *Magnolia kobus* var. *loebneri* and var. *stellata*. As these cultivars have grown, definite opinions of their value have been formed. What follows is my ranking of those cultivars and clones that inhabit my garden. Early or late blooming is not an important consideration as frosts are as likely to happen late as early. I won't pretend that my evaluation of any clone doesn't change from year to year, or that that seedling that has never bloomed might not eclipse them all next year. Indeed, I hope that the latter is just the case.

Stellatas

Jane Platt—A wonderful upright, quite vigorous tree forming stellata. It has the darkest deep pink/purple color and does not droop its outer tepals as many stellatas do. A very heavy bloomer with good frost resistance in bud and bloom.

King Rose—As upright and vigorous as 'Jane Platt.' The most beautiful in bud, a true rose-pink. Less poise, but larger flowers than 'Jane Platt.'

Waterlily—My clone is from Gossler Farms Nursery. Late blooming and very heavy bloomer with larger blooms than 'Jane Platt' or 'King Rose.' Not as vigorous as those clones and more rounded in growth. Half the size of 'Jane Platt' in equal

number of years.

Royal Star—The earliest and heaviest bloomer. Vigorous, with rounded shape—as wide as tall. Very high in my esteem because it breaks the winter doldrums with first bloom. Some frost damage nearly every year, but it still manages to make a great "show."

Pink Stardust—This clone, from Tom Dodd Nurseries, has larger flowers than 'Jane Platt,' but does not grow as vigorously. Growth more like 'Royal Star' on smaller scale. Blooms nearly as dark, in bud, as 'Jane Platt.'

Centennial—My plant is young and just beginning to bloom heavily. Will possibly move above 'Royal Star' with time. Like 'Royal Star,' it sets several flower buds per branch. Seems to be more frost damaged than others.

Kikuzaki—A very small, slow growing plant with equally small, pale pink blooms. Would make an excellent specimen for the very small garden. Very overshadowed in a grouping with other clones.

Unnamed—I have two clones (or perhaps two plants of one clone) I purchased from a local nursery several years ago that are excellent. The blooms closely resemble 'Waterlily' but the plants are much more vigorous (both to about 12 feet at present) and bloom nearly as early as 'Royal Star.' Altogether quite good. Probably from south Alabama source.

Loebneri

Spring Snow—Just magnificent when in full flower. The sun itself on a nice spring day. Somewhat gawky in form—as wide as tall. Flowers are very large, and the yellow overtone is wonderful.

Merrill—Early, heavy blooming, fragrant. Another winter breaker and loved for it. My trees still upright and vigorous. Older tree (1966) I planted at my parents' house while in college is 25 feet tall and probably as wide. A white cloud in good spring. Like 'Royal Star,' it is frequently damaged by frost but just keeps on blooming.

Ballerina—Daintier in every way when compared to either of above. Very upright tree. Very sparse bloomer in youth (as



Magnolia \times loebneri seedling of 'Leonard Messel.' Possible sibling of 'Raspberry Fun,' from the TMS Seed Counter.

is 'Merrill'). Stellata-like flower nice, but I prefer the larger, broader tepals of 'Spring Snow' or 'Merrill.'

Willowwood—The individual flowers are not great, but there are so many of them! The tree is globe shaped, as wide as tall (not as upright as 'Merrill'). Covers itself each year with very heavy bloom. Later than 'Merrill.'

White Stardust—Upright, open growing. Just starting to bloom well. Blooms are as large as 'Merrill' and have more tepals. When heavy blooming commences, I think this one will move up in the ranking.

Leonard Messel—Small, dainty looking compared to 'Merrill' and 'Spring Snow.' Good color, but small spidery blooms don't turn me on. I was very impressed with this clone in England in 1996. The color was much more intense than in Tennessee sunshine. Possibly a factor of generally cooler spring weather. An open grown specimen planted in a neighbor's yard has a perfect pine cone shape and blooms so heavily it obscures the branches.

Vegetable Garden—A clone from Camellia Forest Nursery. Very slow growing plant with few blooms so far. Seems much like the stellata cultivar, 'Rosea,' or 'Leonard Messel,' but has more tepals than the latter. Somewhat damaged by frost this year while 'Leonard Messel' was not.

Spring Joy—Very slow growing and a very reluctant bloomer. About half the size of 'White Stardust' in same number of years and growing alongside. Small, dainty white flowers.

Other clones—I have a seedling of 'Leonard Messel' that seems, from Ferris Miller's description and timing of Seed Counter listing, to be a sibling of his 'Raspberry Fun.' It is much more vigorous than its parent, making a single trunk tree of some 12-14 feet in 10 years. The branches are muscular and slightly zigzagged much like 'Spring Snow.' The blooms have 18-22 tepals with color just slightly lighter than 'Leonard Messel.' Altogether a much better clone, I think. With more experience, I think this clone will move into third place in this ranking. I also have several seedlings that are just starting to bloom that have more tepals than 'Merrill' with similar



Magnolia x loebneri (*seedling of M. kobus var. borealis*) with 52 tepals.
Seed from TMS Seed Counter.

coloring. It is too early to evaluate them.

Two hand pollinated seedlings of 'Royal Star' x 'Merrill' from Tetsuo Magaki of Japan bloomed for the first time this year. One is shrubby and twiggy like 'Royal Star,' the other is upright and single trunked. The shrubby one has blooms the size and tepal count of 'Merrill,' but the pink/purple stripe on the outer tepals is more prominent. The tree form one is excellent. The blooms are much like those described above for the 'Raspberry Fun' sibling, but are slightly lighter. The pink color is diffused over the outer surface of the tepals making the plant glow from a distance in marked contrast to white blooming cultivars nearby.

Another clone that bloomed for the first time this year made an instant impression. The buds of this *M. kobus* var. *borealis*

('Borealis,' Callaway) seedling from the Seed Counter were quite fat and very slow to open. When they finally did, their tardiness was explained and immediately forgiven. Of the flowers sacrificed for counting, the tepal count was exactly 52. The 4 to 5" blooms looked like pompoms. The outside tepals had a very small and pale pink smear at their base; the open bloom looked pure white. For a time after opening, a ring of tepals remained upright around the gynoecium, completely hiding it. The plant is single trunked and very upright. Its growth will be carefully monitored—it is definitely a "keeper"!

Of the other Section Buergeria species and clones, I am particularly fond of 'Wada's Memory,' as much for its beautiful tree form and copper red new foliage as for its flowering. The supposed *M. salicifolia* clones are starting to bloom well now. 'W. B. Clarke' sets very few buds but has grown vigorously to a beautifully shaped small tree. The few flowers are very large, to 6 inches, but I would swap size for quantity. Perhaps with more age. 'Miss Jack,' a twenty foot tree in 10 years or so, blooms very heavily and all along its rather gangly, open branches. The blooms flop very much like 'Wada's Memory.' Not nearly so handsome a plant, however. *M. x proctoriana* 'Slavin's Snowy' has proved very disappointing in flower as it sometimes blooms before 'Royal Star' and does not suffer frost gladly. It surprisingly loses 25-30% of its buds each winter. It is very vigorously upright and quite handsome as a tree, much like 'Wada's Memory.' 'Super Star,' introduced by Ray Bracken of 'Bracken's Brown Beauty' fame, is somewhat of a mystery plant. Dorothy Callaway lists it as a loebneri cultivar in her book, *The World of Magnolias*. The stem color and fine branching suggest a *M. salicifolia* hybrid. It most closely resembles 'Slavin's Snowy' in these respects. The blooms are dainty, but wonderfully striped in red (not purple) and borne in abundance very late in the bloom season. The tree is very dense and handsome in foliage.

In all a praiseworthy group with which to banish winter. And yes, I do have a young 'Gold Star,' that clever little cross by Phil Savage, to give yet more color some future spring to the Buergeria family of all stars. ☺

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