

Some Reflections on Evergreen Magnolia Matings

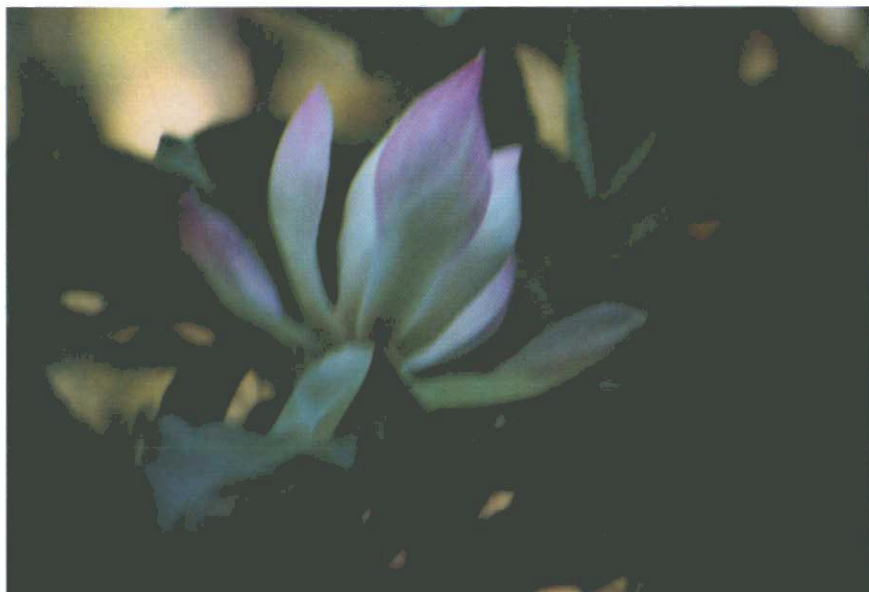
S. Christopher Early

About thirty-five years ago I was in California visiting some of the scientific companies we represented here in the southeast. At that time, I was fortunate to acquire some cuttings of *Manglietia insignis* and *Magnolia coco*. I was told that *M. insignis* was difficult to root, and as it turned out, *M. coco* was much easier.

To root the *M. insignis*, I inserted the cuttings in a medium of perlite, which I placed in a wire screen basket and suspended over the top of a large wastebasket. I added water to the wastebasket and rigged a 100-watt bulb between the water and the growing medium. To aerate the water, I used a small fish tank pump. One cutting rooted! When this cutting grew into a small tree in our atrium, it intermittently bore a few pink flowers with nearly invisible pollen (see photo). (I must say this plant has an ephemeral blooming habit as to year and time of year!)

The pistils on one or two of the *M. insignis* flowers accepted pollen from a version of *M. virginiana* found near Savannah, which I call "Savannah." (The offspring of this version of *M. virginiana* often bloom as small plants along the highway and are cut down by the mowers.) The result of this cross formed seed from which I grew six plants, two of which were about twelve feet tall. In 1997, one of the two tall seedlings bloomed with pink flowers about the size of the *Manglietia*. To date, I have not been successful in rooting or grafting cuttings of this pink hybrid. There is no pollen and the pistils seem atrophied. In a more vigorous time and location this situation might improve. (See photo.)

Before I made this *Manglietia* cross, I placed *M. coco* pollen on the flower of *M. grandiflora* growing in my neighbor's yard. A number of seedlings of this "mating" have bloomed, but I cannot say they are



S. Christopher Early

Pink Magnolia insignis.



S. Christopher Early

Hybrid pink evergreen magnolia. The pistils on one or two of the M. insignis flowers accepted pollen from a version of M. virginiana found near Savannah to produce this hybrid.



Tom Dodd

*Magnolia 'Madison,' an example of a natural hybrid of *M. grandiflora* and *M. virginiana* found growing near Huntsville, Alabama.*



S. Christopher Early

*Michelia x foggii, a hybrid of *M. figo* x *M. doltsova*. The *M. doltsova* bloomed once, supplied pollen for a cross with *M. figo*, then promptly died.*

hybrids. It is my impression that *M. coco* should be placed in a separate genus, as at one time it was called *Talauma pumila*. I have seen a rather stunted plant of *Talauma hodgsonii* with similar, but larger leaves, growing in the old Francheschi garden in Santa Barbara, California. [Editor's note: Interestingly, taxonomists and molecular biologists now consider *M. coco* and *T. hodgsonii* to be part of the same group. *T. hodgsonii* has been renamed *Magnolia liliifera* var. *obovata*, but is often called *Magnolia hodgsonii*, as well.]

As a manufacturers' representative for forty years in the southeast, I traveled widely and was able to observe many of our native plants as well as invaders. (Perhaps that makes me a would-be Bartram of sorts!) There is much variation, and perhaps natural hybridization, between our two evergreen magnolias: *M. grandiflora* and *M. virginiana*. Evergreen forms of *M. virginiana* grow from the foothills of the mountains of Tennessee to the southern tip of Florida. A particularly fine version grows around the outer banks of North Carolina. With *M. grandiflora* being hexaploid, I have not had much success crossing it with *M. virginiana*, but I've observed many beautiful variations (presumed crosses) in the wild. Magnolia 'Madison' is one example of a natural hybrid of *M. grandiflora* and *M. virginiana* found growing near Huntsville, Alabama (see photo). (This photograph was sent to me by Tom Dodd.)

Another time, I ventured to see what could be done with the banana shrub, *Michelia figo*. While in California, I found I could buy only a nine foot size *M. doltsopa* that would bloom. With much persuasion, Delta Airlines accepted it as baggage. In the excitement at the receiving end in the old Atlanta airport, I managed to knock a hole in the ceiling of baggage claim!

The *M. doltsopa* bloomed once, supplied pollen for a cross with *M. figo*, and then promptly died. I don't think it liked Georgia. However, a vigorous hybrid survives today grafted on a large banana shrub in the atrium (see picture). Its flowers are larger than *M. figo*, but are not fragrant. Although its cuttings root easily, in some winters it is not hardy in Atlanta. A similar cross, but using *M. doltsopa* as the seed parent, was made by Phil Savage in the early 1970's. This hybrid is now known as *M. × foggii*. 🌸