

In Praise of *Magnolia zenii*

Rod Wild

I look out of my bedroom window in February. The lawn has that dull, wintry look. The remains of the old moat, which is wonderful with water lilies in summer, is dank and despondent. To the right and left there are drifts of snow drops, but the herbaceous borders are lifeless. In the distance, the line of trees is a uniform grey, with no sign of emerging foliage. But there, on a slight rise, is a glistening pyramid of white. *Magnolia zenii* is announcing the arrival of spring! It has fought its way through the frosts to be easily the first of my little collection to bloom and none of the later varieties will be as welcome.

Magnolia zenii is a deciduous species from China. It is extremely rare in the wild and only found its way to the USA in 1980. It is not quite our most recent magnolia "discovery," that honor going, just, to *M. biondii*, but *M. zenii* is still rare in cultivation. The individual blooms are decidedly not showy. They come out of bud as a slim white candle, with purple staining at the base. They unfold nicely but are rather untidy when fully open, about 4 inches (10 cm) across. The species is, however, very floriferous so it gives a good overall display. The blooms are quite fragrant. The foliage is unremarkable but the shape of the tree is good—a neat upright goblet.

M. zenii is easy to grow. I garden in Guildford, near London, on heavy clay, neutral or even slightly alkaline. I have difficulty with many of the Asiatic species, but not with *M. zenii*. I bought it seven years ago as a tiny plant but it is now 12 feet (3.7m) tall, which is not bad for a tree that is supposed to top out at about 20 feet (6m).

It seems to be quite hardy, and for me is as tough as old boots. Guildford is Zone 8, but a rather unfriendly Zone 8. England's feeble summers often fail to ripen magnolia wood fully and I'm in a nasty frost pocket. My *M. zenii* gets little protection from our cold northeasterly winter winds. Dorothy Callaway (*The World of Magnolias*, Timber Press) suggests *M. zenii* could be hardy to Zone 5, which wouldn't surprise me. The main thing is that the blooms take quite a lot of frost. This year, whilst opening and in early bloom, there were four stiff frosts, including 23° F (-5° C). This puts them, as far as I am concerned, alongside some of the *loebneri* forms in terms of bloom frost-resistance. Another virtue is that *M. zenii* flowers from a young age. Callaway says seven to nine years from seed. Graham Rankin (*Magnolia—a Hamlyn Care Manual*) says four years from grafting, which accords with my experience.

But the key question is "Is it really so early?" And indeed, "Is it the earliest?" None of the references mention this characteristic. Dick Figlar thinks it is early, so there is some backup to my experiences. As I write this, my one *Magnolia campbellii* (growing in a sheltered spot) is coming into bloom, while the *M. zenii* is finally dropping its flowers after having bloomed for nearly a month. Last year was the same. To beat *M. campbellii* by four weeks, that must say something.

The main problem for anyone wishing to try the species is availability. The Royal Horticultural Society's "Plant Finder" for Britain does not yet list a single supplier. Perhaps it is better elsewhere but I suspect not. I got mine from Graham when he was with David Clulow at Tilgates (sadly, now closed). However, any Magnolia Society member is welcome to call by my place for a few scions or cuttings.

If you can't find *M. zenii*, Dick Figlar says that *Magnolia biondii* runs a close second in terms of flowering time and it is more freely available. Also, *M. biondii* probably has a better flower, but since my *M. biondii* is too young to flower, I cannot compare the two. But, if you can get a *M. zenii*, go for it!

I enjoy taking part in a Magnolia Newsgroup on the Internet run by *egroups*. Recently, one of the lighter topics was "Top Five" where people listed their favorites. Unsurprisingly

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M. zenii, a glistening pyramid of white in the dead of winter

the results were dominated by the wonderful Asiatic tree magnolias and the *M. acuminata* or the New Zealand hybrids. No one mentioned humble *M. zenii*. But for me, its very early flowering, combined with its toughness, gives it a place in my, admittedly rather large, "Top Five." To have even such an understated beauty in flower so early, before anything else seems to be stirring, and to know that it can take a few degrees of frost, is a treat indeed. Like the snowdrops with which it flowers, it is a sign that the good times will roll! 🌸🌸