

## Another view of *Magnolia grandiflora*

Peter Del Tredici

Every once in a while it's important to realize that the assumptions we make about the world may be no older than ourselves. I was reminded of this recently while thumbing through a copy of "A Book of the United States" that I found on the shelf of my in-laws home in West Cornwall, Connecticut. The book had once belonged to my wife's grandfather, the historian Carl Van Doren, and had been unopened for many years. It was a fat book, published in 1838 by H. F. Sumner & Co., of Hartford, Connecticut, and edited by one, Grenville Mellen. Its full title reveals an ambitious agenda: "A Book of the United States: exhibiting its geography, divisions, constitution and government; and presenting a view of the republic generally and of the individual states; together with a condensed history of the land, from it first discovery to the present time."

My whole reason for calling your attention to this obscure book is that it contains an extensive section on botany, including a description of *Magnolia grandiflora* that knocked my socks off when I first read it. Displaying typical northern naiveté, I had no idea that anyone could not like this plant, let alone loath it the way this author, Mr. Flint, obviously does. And so in the interest of history and with an open mind, I present a contrarian view of the Bull Bay Magnolia from 1838:

*Magnolia grandiflora*.—"Bartram and other," says Mr. Flint, 'by overrating the beauty of this tree, have caused, that when strangers first behold it, their estimation of it falls too low. It has been described, as a very large tree. We have seen it in Florida, where Bartram saw it. We have seen it in its more congenial position for full development, the rich alluvions of Louisiana; and we have never seen it compare with the sycamore, the cotton wood, or even the ash, in point of size. It is sometimes a tall tree; often graceful in form; but ordinarily a tree of fourth or fifth rate in point of comparative size in the forest, where it grows. Its bark is smooth, whitish, very thick, and something resembles that of the beech. The wood is soft, and for aught we know, useless. The leaves strongly resemble those of the orange tree, except in being larger, thicker, and having a hoary yellowish down upon the un-

der side. The upper side has a perfect verdure, and a feel of smoothness, as if it was oiled. The flowers are large, of a pure white, nearest resembling the northern pond lily, though not so beautiful; and are, ordinarily, about twice the size. The fragrance is indeed, powerful, but to us rather sickly and offensive. We have felt, and we have heard others complain of feeling a sensation of faintness, in going into a room, where the chimney place was filled with these flowers. The tree continues to put forth flowers for two months in succession, and seldom displays many at a time.

We think, few have been in habits of examining flowering trees more attentively than ourselves, and we contemplated this tree for years in the season of flowers. Instead of displaying, as had been represented, a cone of flowers, we have seldom seen a tree in flower, which did not require some attention and closeness of inspection, to discover where the flowers were situated among the leaves. We have not been led to believe, that others possessed the sense of smell more acutely, than ourselves. In advancing from points, where these trees were not, to the pine forest, on the water courses of which they are abundant, we have been warned of our approach to them by the sense of smell, at a distance of something more than half a mile; and we question, if any one ever perceived the fragrance much farther, except by the imagination. The magnolia is a striking tree, and an observer, who saw it for the first time, would remark it, as such. But we have been unable to conceive whence the extravagant misconceptions, respecting the size, number, fragrance and beauty of its flowers, had their origin.

### **Errata**

Correct Issue 78 to reflect the following:

Page 7, sixth line from bottom should read *plate 188*, not page 188.

Page 10, *M. tamaulipana* is native to *northeastern* Mexico, not *northwestern* Mexico.

Dick Figlar

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