Magnolia dianica 'Michelle' (syn: Michelia yunnanensis 'Michelle')

Tony Avent
Photographs by the author

My October 1996 trip to Yunnan, China got off to a lackluster start as we spent the first day in the pouring rain at the Western Hills Preserve above Kunming. Although the skies cleared for our second day, the flora was depauperate as we headed west of Kunming, toward Dali, on the main highway connecting the two towns. We made our first stop in a small cemetery one hour west of Kunming at 6,100ft (1859m) elevation. The purpose of this stop was to examine a large tree of the rare *Calocedrus macrolepis*. Our guide, Dr. Guan Kayun from the Kunming Institute of Botany, explained that, in this region, the only trees and native flora remaining were in cemeteries due to the overabundance of agrarian activities.

Farmer's cottage where parent plant was found.

Magnolia 'Michelle' photographed at Plant Delights Nursery.

As we passed the caretakers' quarters, which were nearly obscured by racks of drying corn, we spotted the *Calocedrus*. While everyone was admiring the *Calocedrus*, I spied three, 5ft (1.5m) tall stunted plants of *Magnolia dianica*... obviously munched on by yaks or a similar herbivore. I noticed that leaves were somewhat smaller and the plants more compact than the plants that I had seen in the trade. Obviously, this could be due to the stressed environmental conditions under which it was growing. I looked the plant over for seed, but it wasn't until I got on my knees did I find six old seeds on the ground underneath the plants. Growing alongside the michelia in the open scrubby ground were *Paris polyphylla* and *Artemisia lactiflora*, along with large clumps of *Saccharum arundinaceum*.

Upon my return to North Carolina, I planted the seed and was thrilled when all six germinated. The plants were later transferred to one-gallon pots for further evaluation. Five of the seedlings showed the open, gangly habit and sparse flowering typical of most of the *Magnolia dianica* that I had seen. In containers, one of the seedlings was much more compact and also showed itself to be a precocious bloomer. The typical seedlings were given away, and the best of the seedlings was planted into our garden (Juniper Level Botanic Garden) in May 1999.

In 2003, this seedling selection had further shown itself to be of exceptional garden merit, and I gave it the cultivar name *M.* 'Michelle' after my wife of 28 years. In fall 2005, the original plant had reached 14ft (4.3m) in height with a 9ft (2.7m) spread. *M.* 'Michelle' is still growing at nearly 2ft (0.6m) per year, so we do not yet know the mature height that the plant will achieve under garden conditions (note:

only organic fertilizers are used). During this time, the plant had endured a low temperature of 7°F (–13.9°C) with no cold damage. The foliage is typical for the species, although the new leaves show a slight touch of brown indumentum on the undersides.

Original seed parent plant in China behind the farmer's cottage.

The numerous bronze-brown flower buds are very attractive before the flowers begin to open. The floriferousness of this clone has been outstanding, compared to all other michelias that we have grown. The 2.5–3in (6.4–7.6cm) wide flowers have a delicious light fragrance that is quite noticeable, especially early in the day. The branch tips are laden with flowers with many pedicels producing two buds. A typical 12in (30cm) long branch produces between 12–18 flowers. *Magnolia* 'Michelle' typically begins flowering around April 1 and reaches its peak bloom around April 9.

I find this specimen to be an extraordinary addition to gardens from zone 7b and south. We have distributed cuttings from *M.* 'Michelle' and will try to propagate this ourselves during the upcoming year.

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