

## **Magnolia 'Mon Champa' My Ultimate Yellow Magnolia**

*Satha Suesatcha*

I am just a magnolia enthusiast without any background in botany or horticulture living in the tropical country of Thailand. My location is approximately 300 miles (480 kilometers) north of Bangkok. It's a typical lowland, elevation 650ft (200m), with a not-so-humid tropical climate where it is too warm for most of the magnificent colorful temperate magnolias. This limits my ability to grow any more than a few species and cultivars of both local (especially the hill species) as well as the exotics (including a few subgenus *Yulania* cultivars). Thus, I have concluded that if I want more diversification in my collection, I will have to attempt to create hybrids among my own tropical species and cultivars and/or with the exotics. So, I began to get serious about this about four years ago and now I'm beginning to see some results.

By luck, the first one that has flowered is very encouraging: a yellow hybrid of which I am rather proud and consider to be an ultimate yellow. It's a cross between *Magnolia liliifera* var. *liliifera* (known locally as Montha) and (*Magnolia champaca*) (known locally as Champa). Unlike, most of the temperate yellow magnolia cultivars that obtain their creamy or pale-yellow pigmentation from *M. acuminata*, the yellow in this new hybrid is a bright or golden yellow.

My magnolia friends who have more botanical background than I would not expect that I could make this cross and they themselves probably would have never attempted it. This is because the two parent species are thought to be much too far apart and are much different morphologically in nearly all aspects: the tree size, the leaf size and shape, the flower form and the fruit type are all entirely different. They even were formerly considered to belong to two different genera, *Talauma candollei* and *Michelia champaca*. But because of my ignorance, I was not aware of these potential barriers to hybridization. All I wanted was to combine the merits of the two species.

The *Magnolia liliifera* I used is the cultivar called 'Montha Baan' (Home Montha) or 'Montha Kai' (Egg Montha). In my country, it is only found in cultivation, not in the wild and that is why it is called Home Montha. It's a small tree or bush, which can grow to about 33ft (10m) tall, but is usually smaller and has three or four stems, each about 1in (2 to 3cm) in diameter. It has flowers of a good soft yellow color, 1-1½in (3-4cm) long and 1in (2-3cm) in diameter with nine wide tepals, in three layers of three tepals each. The outer three are rath-



Left to right: *Magnolia liliifera*, the hybrid *Magnolia* 'Mon Champa,' and *Magnolia champaca*.

er greenish compared to the pale yellow color of the six inner tepals. The nodding flowers are placed at the ends of long shoots (terminal flowers). It has a few undesirable characteristics, however. The worst one is that the flowers never really fully open. They just open about halfway for a few hours in the late morning and then close back up again in the afternoon, and then fall off the next day, while the inner tepals are still closed in a shape resembling the form of an egg. The "egg" then falls to the ground in one piece, which is why it is called Egg Montha.

The Champa is perhaps the best known tropical *Magnolia*. It has a wide range of distribution throughout tropical southeast Asia and has many forms and cultivars. Typical color pigmentation of the tepals ranges from orange-yellow to soft yellow. It has rather small pointed flowers of 12–15 tepals. The outer tepals are about half an inch (1–1½cm) wide by 1½in (4cm) long, while the inner tepals are smaller and much more narrow. The flowers are produced in profusion from short axillary shoots (pseudo-axillary) which is typical for section *Michelia*, but as in other tropical magnolias, the flowers are generally small and are produced while leaves are present on the tree (evergreen leaves). Therefore, Champa is not so eye-catching as the temperate magnolias, but when a tree is in bloom, the sweet smell of this tree can be detected from great distances.

I used *M. liliifera* as the mother parent and Champa as the pollinator. *Magnolia liliifera* has a rather small fruit so I got only six seedlings. The first seedling produced its first flowers in less than four years. Of course, I augmented the growth of this seedlings by inarching additional root stocks. It turned out that the hybrid had all the desirable intermediate characters of the two parents that I had hoped for. And what really amazed me is that this particular seedling inherited only the good qualities of each of the parents, or combined the good ones from both:





Splendid bloom of *Magnolia* 'Mon Champa' (*M. liliifera* x *M. champaca*).

- upright flowers with fully open tepals—unlike its mother, *M. liliifera*
- broader tepals contrary to the *M. champaca*
- color is intermediate between soft yellow (Montha) and orange (Champa) resulting in bright golden yellow
- terminal flower buds like the *liliifera*, but also is accompanied by clusters of three to four pseudo-axillary flowers (each opens only one at a time)

When fully open, the blooms have a diameter of 7in (18cm) with each outer tepal measuring about 10cm long and 5cm wide. At present the plant is about 8ft (2½m) tall, and the leaves are about 10in (25cm) long by 5in (12cm) wide. So far, it seems to flower continuously all year round. The flower fragrance is even better than in *M. champaca*.

I decided to name the new hybrid *M. 'Mon Champa'* so that it will sound like the combination of its parents: Montha and Champa. But since *Mon* has another meaning in our language, which is *stunning magic*, the name is also intended to mean the Stunning Champa.

The other five seedlings have not yet flowered, but at least all have different variations and sizes of leaves, so it is possible that the flowers, too, will be distinct. It's really exciting to watch and wait for what will eventually happen.

I also have crossed *M. liliifera* with some of my other exotics: *Magnolia grandiflora*, *M. x soulangeana*, and *M. 'Star Wars.'* The latter cross is now 6½ft (2m) tall already. I cannot imagine what will be my next exciting event with these and other crosses. It is possible that I will produce the first yellow-flowering *M. grandiflora* to show the world!



Developing young fruits: *Magnolia champaca* (left), *M. liliifera* (right), and the hybrid *M. 'Mon Champa'* (center).

[It appears certain that *Magnolia 'Mon Champa'* represents the first successful crossing between a species of section *Gwillimia* (subgenus *Magnolia*) and one of section *Michelia* (subgenus *Yulania*). This, undoubtedly, opens the door to even more possibilities for tropical *Magnolia* breeding. But equally important, this breakthrough also serves to remind temperate breeders that the orange-flowered varieties of the tropical diploid *Magnolia champaca* (USDA zone 9) could be used as a parent in temperate matchups, such as with *Magnolia acuminata* (USDA zone 4). Potentially, such crosses could usher in a new wave of deeper yellow, deciduous hybrids with at least some degree of hardiness due to the higher ploidy (tetraploid) of *M. acuminata*. —Ed. (Dick Figlar)]

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All photographs by the author.