

Nick Reimer's Legacy: A Magnolia Arboretum in British Columbia

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When one thinks of Canada, thoughts of ice hockey, polar bears, and frozen tundra come to mind much more quickly than magnolias flowering in spring. However, along Canada's southern border with the USA there are milder regions and in one of these regions in the southwest corner of Canada is the magnolia arboretum of Nick Reimer.

Nick Reimer, my father, was born just before the Great Depression of the 1930s and, with his father, built a wholesale nursery business serving USDA zones 3-8 in Washington, Oregon and Canada. While fruit trees and roses were the starting point of the nursery and shade trees became the main source of income, he learned to love magnolias the most.

In 1980, Dad moved to a six-acre site in Abbotsford, British Columbia, which is located about 40 miles east of Vancouver in the Fraser Valley (site of the 2010 Winter Olympics). It has a zone 7/8 marine-influenced climate and sits about 30 miles from the inland salt waters of southwest British Columbia. This property had hardwood and evergreens such as western red cedar and western hemlocks, as well as stunning views of Mount Baker in northwest Washington and other snow-capped peaks to the north. Although he didn't realize it at the time, the site's north-facing slope would later become an important factor in successfully growing his magnolias. In his spare time (he was still running a nursery), he set to work to clear a lot of the hardwoods to create room for the magnolias that he had in mind. Dad had been influenced by his good friend Herman Grootendoorst of Boskoop, Holland, to try different magnolias that Herman had

collected over the years. So we see in the initial plantings selections such as the Kosar/deVos hybrids or "Little Girls" and various other Gresham hybrids. Alongside these he planted a stunning *M. denudata*. This was probably his favorite and it still is one of the best in his arboretum.



M. denudata, originally one of Dad's favorites

Dad's initial intent was simply to surround himself with beauty, but over the years he came to realize that this could become a place to learn about and evaluate magnolias. During the 1980s, Dad had thousands of magnolias, but was concentrating on growing about ten cultivars that met the test of commercial production; namely, that they grew to reasonable size, produced many flowers at an early age and had good hardiness. He realized that some nursery choices were made mostly because a magnolia would start flowering early in its life (such as *M.* 'Yellow Bird') and so would crowd out later-flowering *M. campbellii* and *M. campbellii* subsp. *mollicomata* varieties. In order to sell magnolias at garden centers and other retail outlets, they must be seen in flower. Growers call these the "instant flowering" varieties, as opposed to species such as *M. campbellii*, which can take 20-30 years to flower significantly. Most homeowners don't live that long in one location and almost certainly wouldn't have the patience to buy a tree on promise. Yet he felt constrained by the limits of this market and started to think that perhaps premature judgments had been made. Some selections would take time to grow into beauty or their subtle beauty would be missed initially, and he felt those reasons were enough justification to include them in his collection.

Dad's plantings often reflected some of the people with whom he came into contact. For example, in one corner we see New Zealand hybrids such as *M.* 'Atlas', *M.* 'Athene' and *M.* 'Milky Way', which came from Duncan and Davies Nurseries in New Zealand. Further back were the Augie Kehr offspring: *M.* 'Daybreak', *M.* 'Sunburst' and *M.* \times *loebneri* 'Encore'. Sprinkled throughout were cultivars that he ordered from Otto Eisenhut in Switzerland. Old invoices show cultivars that were intended to stretch the limits of our climate zone, such as *M. campbellii* 'Piet Van Veen' and *M. c.* 'Princess Margaret', while others were chosen for their striking beauty, such as *M. sprengeri* 'Eric Savill'; still others would fill gaps in his collection.



M. campbellii 'Piet Van Veen' with its distinctive cup-and-saucer flower

Later influences were the hybrids of Dennis Ledvina. I think Dad wanted to see if the *M. campbellii*s, *M. sprengeri*s and *M. c.* subsp. *mollicomatas* could be grown successfully in his climate. For the most part he succeeded. One of his favorite trees, *M. sargentiana* var. *robusta* 'Blood-

Magnolia

moon', died as a result of an early winter in 2006; *M. campbellii* 'Charles Raffill' died shortly thereafter (likely from the same winter injury) and *M. campbellii* 'Wakehurst' has a crack in the trunk. The rest of the collection has survived very well, and there are now about 160 different selections, mostly hybrids.

Dad loved his plants and he loved to show others what he had developed. His greatest satisfaction was sharing a tour of the magnolia collection with other magnolia lovers. Pat



Augie Kehr brushing pollen of *M. 'Fertile Myrtle'* onto Dad's *M. 'Caerhays Belle'*. According to Pat McCracken this was the last cross that Augie did in his life.

MaCracken was one of the first to stop by. Pat also persuaded Augie Kehr to travel to the Northwest during the last year of his life. Even though he was becoming frail, Augie seemed very energized by the magnolias in the arboretum. He and Dad spent a pleasant morning looking at many of the hybrids in flower. We knew Dad was having a good time, too, because he was only mildly annoyed at having his picture taken that day. Lunch was served by Mom, and after we ate she and Augie started singing a German love song together. It was probably the only German love song that Augie knew from his childhood, but the pleasant day brought it to mind. The afternoon found Augie up a ladder brushing pollen of *M. acuminata* 'Fertile Myrtle' onto *M. 'Caerhays Belle'* while Dad was asking him if he was afraid of heights.



Augie Kehr (L) and Nick Reimer (R) during a visit to Nick's arboretum

Dad was also happy and proud when the group from the Magnolia Society meeting in Seattle came for a post-tour visit. I believe he sensed an understanding from those members of what had been accomplished and the effort he had made. It is a rare thing to pursue a passion and even more rewarding to share that work with others of the same mind and passion. More often, our experience is echoed in the

words of William Blake, "The tree which moves some to tears of joy is in the Eyes of others only a Green thing which stands in the way." (Letter to Rev. Dr. Trusler, Aug. 23, 1799)

There are challenges to every climatic and geographic location in regards to a magnolia arboretum. Late in his life, Augie Kehr commented on his impending move to Iowa, about which he said, "It's not suitable for man or beast, much less a magnolia." By contrast, the southwest corner of British Columbia is generally a plant lover's paradise. Magnolias grow well here if given appropriate care. The summer in B.C. is surprisingly dry and that can stress magnolias. At this arboretum, the slope is generally towards the north; this keeps the ground from getting parched and hot in the summer while the trees' tops still receive adequate sunlight and warmth. This north-facing slope also helps spring flowering by delaying it slightly, enabling the blossoms to escape some of the late frosts. Perhaps Dad knew this intuitively from years of watching plants grow.

There is still important work to do in the arboretum. The evergreen magnolias have largely been ignored. Perhaps, again, premature judgments have been made. Being mostly a marine climate, especially during the summer, the magnolias don't get enough heat to harden the foliage. The dry cold winter winds often come from the interior of the province and desiccate the foliage. Newer, marine-hardy evergreen *M. grandifloras*, as well as some of the hardier magnolias of section *Manglietia* and section *Michelia* will need to be tested.

Although it is understood within the family that this collection will be a private arboretum with the costs assumed by the family, attention is also needed in order to ensure that the right person will look after the arboretum in the long term. This is an ongoing challenge with both public as well as private gardens, and others' experience can teach us a good deal.



M. 'lolanthe' (*M. ×soulangeana* 'Lennei' × *M. 'Mark Jury'*) in bloom in March, 2010

Dad left us in 2004. We, his family, are left with this legacy of beauty and think often of him, especially when the magnolias are in bloom.