

## 2011 Gresham Awards presented

The D. Todd Gresham Award was established in 1981 in order to recognize individuals who have made extraordinary contributions to the development, improved culture, increased knowledge and promotion of magnolias, or who have contributed outstanding service to the Magnolia Society.

Lola Koerting was honored at the Magnolia Society's banquet dinner on May 7 and Steve Spongberg was honored on May 10 during a separate ceremony which took place at the Stephen A. Spongberg Library at Polly Hill Arboretum. Dick Figlar, Awards and Honors Chairman, made the following presentations at those ceremonies.

### Lola Koerting

The story of tonight's award recipient begins at the 1977 annual meeting of Magnolia Society at Washington, DC. I was at that meeting (it was my first) as were a few others here tonight, including Gordon Hagen, Elliott Jessen and Harry Heineman. During the Friday night presentations, a young and enthusiastic Plant Researcher from



Awards Committee Chairman Dick Figlar (L) and MSI President Andrew Bunting (R) with Gresham Award recipient Lola Koerting. (photo by Anita Figlar)

Brooklyn Botanic Garden (BBG) took to the podium with a slide carousel and proceeded to show to the Magnolia Society – and the horticulture world – something that had never been seen before: slide after slide of yellow-flowered precocious magnolias – the first ever hybrids between *M. acuminata* and *M. denudata*. The entire audience was astonished, energized and everything in between. Even the normally demure Joe McDaniel later referred to these photographs as “an arresting sight” in his write-up of the meeting.

By now, you all know we are talking about Lola Koerting.

During that time and in the years that followed, Lola went on to energize and invigorate the magnolia breeding program at the BBG's Kitchawan Research station near Ossining, NY. Not only an accomplished plant scientist and magnolia breeder herself, Lola's sheer enthusiasm and passion for her work served as a catalyst for action within a bureaucratic - sometimes slow-moving - BBG organization. Thus, largely as a result of her ef-

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forts, at least six important magnolias were introduced: 'Elizabeth' (1977), 'Yellow Bird' (1981), 'Hattie Carthan' (1984), 'Marillyn' (1989), 'Lois' (1998), and 'Judy Zuk' (2007).

More importantly, Lola's influence on magnolia breeding went far beyond the BBG. That the notoriously "non-showy flowered" *M. acuminata* could successfully be used to extend the hardiness and color ranges of existing showy magnolias represented a major paradigm shift in magnolia development. Contemporary magnolia breeders of that time, Joe McDaniel, Phil Savage, David Leach and others, quickly began incorporating *Magnolia acuminata* into their own breeding programs. Later, August Kehr, Frank Galyon, Dennis Ledvina and others would use those early hybrids as parents in more complex crosses, resulting in second generation hybrids like 'Daybreak' (from *M. ×brooklynensis* and a Gresham hybrid), and 'Blushing Belle' (from 'Yellowbird' and 'Caerhays Belle'). As a result of all this, during a time when public interest in other woody plants was declining, interest in magnolias and the Magnolia Society was expanding – worldwide.

Dr. Craig Hibben, one of Lola's former supervisors at BBG, mentioned to me recently that along with all of her success, "some of the bureaucracy at the BBG still didn't know what a jewel they had." Well, we do, Lola! Tonight, it is with great pleasure we honor you with the D. Todd Gresham Award. Congratulations and thank you, Lola Koerting.

### Stephen A. Spongberg

Stephen A. Spongberg received his Ph.D. in Botany from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. In 1970 he began his 28-year tenure at the Arnold Arboretum of Harvard University, first as Assistant Curator, later as Horticultural Taxonomist as well as Editor of the prestigious *Journal of the Arnold Arboretum* for its final 12 years of its regular publication. It was here where he authored a series of modern treatments of cultivated woody plants. Among these were *Lauraceae Hardy in Temperate North America*, *Styracaceae Hardy in Temperate North America* and, of course, *Magnoliaceae Hardy in Temperate North America*. This 1976 monographic account of the temperate *Magnolias* was the first detailed and comprehensive treatment since G.H. Johnstone's 1955 *Asiatic Magnolias in Cultivation* and J.G. Millais' *Magnolias* in 1927. While it superseded Johnstone in scope, it replaced the largely obsolete Millais volume in its accounts of the temperate magnolias. More importantly, Steve's work quickly inspired others – most notably Neil Treseder (1978), Dorothy Callaway (1994), Jim Gardiner (1989, 2000) - to build and expand upon what he had started, thus ushering in a prosperity of Magnoliaceae knowledge that had been unimaginable before 1976. Over the past 35 years, *Magnoliaceae Hardy in Temperate North America* has consistently been one of the most frequently cited references in both popular and scientific Magnoliaceae literature.

Of course, Steve's work went far beyond Magnoliaceae. In 1980 he participated in the Sino-American Botanical Expedition to western Hubei Province in The People's Republic of China. This historic trip was the first-ever cooperative venture between Chinese and American scientists. In 1990 he authored *A Reunion of Trees* - a comprehensive history of the global exploration for woody plants. This highly regarded account is listed by the American Horticulture Society as one of the seventy-five greatest garden books published in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In 1996 he was awarded the prestigious Gold Veitch Memorial Medal by the Royal Horticultural Society. After his tenure at the Arnold Arboretum in 1998, he became the first director of the Polly Hill Arboretum on Martha's Vineyard and served six years. Polly Hill said, "When Steve accepted the job, way back when, I felt so lucky I could hardly believe it - he has fulfilled those dreams consistently and beautifully."

Steve continues a vital role at the Arboretum as an honorary board member and Director Emeritus. In 2010, the Stephen A. Spongberg Library was established in his honor.

On behalf of the Magnolia Society International, it gives us great pleasure to present the D. Todd Gresham Award to Steve Spongberg.



(L to R) Dick Figlar, Steve Spongberg and Andrew Bunting after ceremony awarding Spongberg with the Gresham Award. They are standing in front of the Polly Hill Arboretum library recently named to honor Spongberg. (photo by Tom Clark)