

Magnolias

by Ernest H. Wilson

No group of trees and shrubs is more favorably known, or more highly appreciated in gardens than Magnolias, and no group produces larger or more abundant blossoms. Magnolias are an old type of vegetation, which, prior to the tertiary glacial epoch, evidently were common trees in the forests of the temperate regions of the whole northern hemisphere. Today, they are entirely absent from Europe, from

western Asia and from North America, west of the Mississippi River.*

The present day species of *Magnolia* proper are readily divisible into three groups distinguished by the persistence or otherwise of their foliage, and by their manner of flowering. In one small group the leaves persist and the trees are evergreen, in another and much larger group the leaves are deciduous and the flowers open with them or after they are partially grown. In a third group the flowers are precocious, appearing well in advance of the foliage. This last group is peculiar to China and Japan with one note-worthy outlying member (*M. Campbellii*) growing as far west as the Sikkim Himalayas. Of the evergreen species one, *M. grandiflora*, is confined to south-eastern U.S.A., the others all belong to the warm Chino-Malay-Himalayan region.†

The first known Magnolias in European gardens were those of eastern North America note-worthy



*One of the western hemisphere evergreen Magnolias overlooked by Wilson was *M. guatemalensis*, shown here, one of around a dozen species native to Mexico and Central America, the Caribbean, and northern South America. All are closely related to *M. grandiflora*.*

*It was generally known by 1930 that almost every magnolia species in the U.S. was growing in at least some locations west of the Mississippi, though less was known about distribution of Mexican Magnolias. Wilson's use of a catchphrase such as "west of the Mississippi" to refer to western North America is understandable of an Englishman who had traveled widely in Asia but knew little of North American geography.

†Evergreen Magnolias in Mexico, the Caribbean, and Central America were, in Wilson's time and even today, not widely known or grown outside their native countries.

alike for their handsome flowers and foliage. Actually, the first Magnolia to be introduced into the British Isles was *M. grandiflora* which was in cultivation in England as early as 1737. In 1746 John Bartram sent to Peter Collinson the well-known Cucumber tree (*M. acuminata*), which first flowered on May 20, 1762. When the precocious flowered Oriental Magnolias were introduced into western gardens the genus assumed a new interest and new aspect in gardens, and these spring-flowering plants soon became the most popular members of their tribe.

The white flowered Yulan (*M. denudata*) was introduced by Sir Joseph Banks in 1789. A year later the Duke of Portland secured the purple Yulan, *M. liliflora*. These and their hybrid forms remained for nearly a century, the only precocious flowered Magnolias known to western gardens. In 1862, *M. stellata* was introduced



M. sprengeri 'Diva' seedpod.

from Japan to be followed in 1876 by *M. kobus* and in 1892 by *M. salicifolia*. In (the 1870's) *M. Campbellii* was introduced from the Sikkim Himalayas.

In 1899, when I first visited China, there were growing in western gardens, apart from garden hybrids and varieties, nine species of Asiatic Magnolias. During my travels in China I collected material of eight species and two varieties, and it was my peculiar good fortune to introduce all but one of them, thus exactly doubling the number of Asiatic Magnolias in cultivation. Of the nine introduced Magnolias one only, *M. Delavayi*, had previously received a name. The other eight were either undiscovered or previously undescribed types. The one species which I failed to introduce, although I did send seeds to the Arnold Arboretum, is *M. Biondii*, native of north-western Hupeh and Shensi, which unwittingly my colleague A. Rehder and myself described as a new species under the name of *M. aulacosperma*.

Of my nine Magnolias one species (*M. delavayi*) is evergreen. Four produce their blossoms on naked shoots early in the spring, the other four with or after the leaves are partly grown. So all groups of the genus are represented. My good fortune will be appreciated when it is understood that previously no wild Magnolia had been introduced into western gardens from the Chinese empire. The two species introduced by Sir Joseph Banks and the Duke of Portland have been favorite flowers in Chinese gardens, since, at least, as early as the Tang Dynasty, which flourished during the sixth and seventh centuries of the Christian era.

The seeds of Magnolias are rich in oil and like such seeds lose their vitality very easily in drying. The oils are low in oxygen and chemical

changes take place on exposure to dry air. My success was due to packing the seeds in slightly moist soil and dispatching them with the greatest possible haste. In later years I found by not removing the scarlet jacket and by wrapping each seed separately in waxed paper that the seeds would travel in paper packets through the mail. Not once, however, did I succeed in sending washed seeds, air-dried, through the post. I tried it several times but always it failed.

Any one wishing to transport Magnolia seeds should gather them as soon as they are ripe, pack them immediately in moderately dry soil or Sphagnum moss and hasten them by the coolest and quickest route to their destination. I do not think it necessary, in fact I am inclined to think it detrimental, to remove the oily scarlet aril. A little mold may develop upon it, but I have not found this detrimental. Certain it is if the aril be removed the seeds lose their vitality in

About This Issue

By now it should be no surprise to readers that this issue is a special one, the bulk of it being about the British plant explorer Ernest H. Wilson, who in the first decade of this century made four trips to China and introduced hundreds of plants previously unknown to western gardeners including several species or varieties of Magnolia; and, of course, about these Magnolias.

Wilson was one of a kind, and his titanic stature in the world of horticulture can be grasped best when one considers what that world would have been without his contributions to it. Wilson was not the first nor the last to tackle the difficulties of hunting down and identifying plants of enduring significance in a vast, strange, and sometimes hostile land, and of managing to transfer intact the vital spark of life they represented to waiting hands half a world away. But he was so successful at it from the first that he was sent back to China three more times to establish a reputation that stands untouched. Others have aptly described his worth and accomplishments as a plant explorer generally, and our purpose in this issue is to try to convey a sense of what his

work has meant to the culture of Magnolias.

This special issue represents the efforts and judgments of many people, beginning with Wilson himself, whose retrospective and heretofore unpublished writings of around 1930 describing his Magnolias, and the particulars of encountering and collecting them for the gardens of the West, provide the centerpiece of this issue. Other experts discuss several aspects of the man and his Magnolias in this issue, and we are even likely to have one or two more articles on the subject in subsequent issues as promised pieces materialize. We wish to thank the several persons and institutions who have contributed articles, ideas and suggestions, and who have permitted the use of material published elsewhere and supplied various intangibles necessary to this undertaking.

We hope our modest efforts to evaluate Wilson and his Magnolias and to render tribute to both from lovers of the genus will bring increased appreciation of a man who could have been content with less if he had been somebody other than Ernest Wilson.



M. cylindrica at Trewithen Gardens, Cornwall, England.

a much shorter space of time.

I had no luck in trying to send home living plants dug from the wilds, nor with scions. My success was solely with seeds. Seedling Magnolias develop slowly and much patience is necessary before one is rewarded with the first blossom. This in itself endangers the introduction of these plants since so many of us have not the necessary patience. Still, maybe Magnolias are less likely to be neglected on this account than other less known trees which also take years to get to maturity. It has been my singular good fortune to live long enough to see or hear of the blossoming of all but two of the Magnolias I introduced.

In the parts of China I have traveled in Magnolias are nowhere really common plants. Locally, here and there, individuals are fairly plentiful but numerically they constitute but an infinitesimal percentage of the forest flora. They occur in thickets,

woodlands and mixed forests where the soil is cool, deep and rich in humus. Often they grow along side streams or ponds. *M. wilsonii* and its relatives frequently grow in rocky places, especially by streams, but always where a woodland soil obtains. In blossom they are, of course, among the most conspicuous elements of the flora but it is only now and again that one comes across a specimen abundantly burdened with blossoms. The precocious flowered sorts are the most conspicuous, but in the half-light of the forest over-hanging still reaches or rushing waters of a mountain torrent the white saucer-shaped, crimson anthered blossoms of *M. wilsonii* make a delightful picture.

Needless to say, I gave much thought and attention to this handsome genus and my efforts have been abundantly rewarded, yet the irony is that in the great garden, over which I have the honor to preside, not one of my Chinese Magnolias has proved hardy.