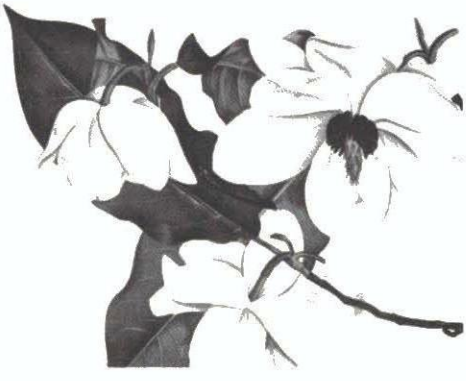
Wilson Magnolias in Britain

by B. F. Savage

The British have been collectors of plants for centuries. By the beginning of the 19th century the plant enthusiast was well established. Britain's worldwide interests ensured a steady stream of new plant material sent home by administrative officials and traders. By the end of that century, Antwerp E. Pratt, traveller, ornithologist and entomologist, in the introduction to his book, "To the Snows of Tibet Through China," wrote: "So little of this great world of ours is new to the explorer or naturalist, that it becomes more difficult year by year to find unworked fields."[1] When E.H. Wilson was about to leave on his first trip to China, specifically to obtain seeds of the Dove Tree, *Davidia involucrata,* Sir Harry Veitch is reported to have said to him: "My boy, stick to the one thing you are after and do not spend time and money wandering about. Probably almost every worthwhile plant in China has now been introduced into Europe." Of course, Wilson upon reaching China disregarded both statements, and a vast number of new plants were introduced into cultivation, many from places unexplored by Western plant experts up to that time.

Dr. Stephen A. Spongberg's botanical treatise "Magnoliacea Hardy in Temperate North America"[2] is dedicated to the memory of E.H. Wilson. Reading this recently, I have been led to look more closely at as many as possible of the Wilson magnolias growing in Britain, and, prompted by the editor of MAGNOLIA, to try and trace some of the original plants from wild seed.

The first of the Wilson magnolias to reach Britain, were of course those discovered and collected as seeds for the nursery firm of Veitch during Wilson's first two journeys to China in 1899 and 1903. Subsequently he collected for the Arnold Arboretum in 1906 and 1910, whence a few of these magnolia seedlings were sent direct to Kew Gardens in 1911. By 1913 Prof. Charles Sargent, director of the Arnold Arboretum, had found that the new young magnolias were not hardy at Boston and he arranged to send them all to the French nursery firm of Leon Chenault at Orleans, for propagation and distribution. A few years later, grafted plants were being received from France by British gardens. It is also possible that Wilson continued to send



Magnolia wilsonii *drawing by A.V. Webster.*

seed on a small scale direct to recipients in Britain while collecting for the Arnold Arboretum.

When in the field, Wilson's methods of working and system of collection and labelling his seeds and herbarium material were different from those of most other collectors. This resulted in mistakes in the mixing of some seed lots and incorrect association of herbarium specimens in flower and those in fruit. This fact, combined with such a quantity of unknown new species—the number of Asian magnolias in cultivation was doubled in a few years—brought these magnolias under discussion from the time they first started to grow and flower and discussion continues right up to the present day. It is probably true to say that no group of a single plant genus introduced by one man has given rise to so much speculation and conjecture as the Wilson Magnolias.

The following notes, still incomplete, are what I have been able to discover so far about the Wilson Magnolias in cultivation in Great Britain.

M. dawsoniana was discovered by Wilson during his third expedition in 1908 and seeds were sent to the Arnold Arboretum. A second collection was made on his fourth trip in 1910-11. The young seedlings were all sent by Arnold to Chenault, who distributed grafted plants. One of these, planted in 1921 at Rowallane, County Down, North Ireland, was the first to flower in 1932 or 1933 and was recorded as being 26 feet high in 1947.[3] Another received at Kew in 1919 died in 1958. The second to flower, in 1936, was at Lanarth, St. Keverne, Cornwall, in the garden of the late P.D. Williams. This plant has a reputation for being laden when mature with thousands of flowers. George Johnstone described the effect as being like trees bedecked with pilgrims' prayers as once were seen in Chinese Temple gardens. He stated that festoonment equal to that

Magnolia denudata *at Nanuet, New York.*

of *M. dawsoniana* as seen at Lanarth at its zenith would require every prayer of every pilgrim in China.[4] The flowers are carried all over the tree down to eye level and are almost impossible to distinguish from those of a good form of *M. sargentiana*, although on the latter the flowers are borne high up. Johnstone, comparing these two magnolias in detail, suggests that *M. sargentiana* might be a natural hybrid of *M. dawsoniana*.[5] There are large plants at Caerhays and Trewithen, well over 50 feet tall. Seedlings have been raised from the original plants. Some of these are exciting, most notable being the one in Nigel Holman's collection at Chyverton, Cornwall. This plant, a seedling from Caerhays in 1944, first flowered in 1968. The backs of the tepals are a lovely deep crimson, much darker than the type. This characteristic varies somewhat with the Winter weather, however, tending to be darker the colder it is. It is reported that this clone (now named 'Chyverton') has the very considerable advantage of having frost resistant flowers, these having withstood, without harm, 8° F (-5° C) of frost.[6]

M. delavayi was one of the very first

collections for Veitch by Wilson and is thought to have been planted at Caerhays as early as 1899. A tree there now measures at least 40 feet high by 40 feet across. *M. delavayi* first flowered under glass at Kew in 1908, although this specimen no longer exists. For an evergreen from so near the tropics it has proved remarkably hardy on walls in the South and elsewhere in Britain. An original Veitch plant purchased at that nursery's Coombe Wood Sale in 1913, is at Highdown in Sussex and is now 36 feet tall. Large plants are also at Borde Hill, Sussex; Bodnant in North Wales; Abbotsbury, Dorset; and Exbury and Pyelwell Park in Hampshire. There is also a good plant, possibly 15 feet tall and flowering well this year on a wall at Hidcote in the Cotswold hills, not renowned for being a mild area by British standards.

M. officinalis was collected by Wilson in 1900 and sent out by Veitch as the "Chinese" *M. hypoleuca*. The Japanese *M. hypoleuca* was already in cultivation and the new magnolia may have been undervalued as a new species for the reason. I have been unable to locate any original plants of Wilson's collection so far. H.G. Hillier and Roy Lancaster consider it probably lost in cultivation, with the possible exception of a plant at Trewithen, Cornwall.[7] Other plants thought to be this species, have turned out to be *M. hypoleuca*. These two similar species have been planted together so as to allow comparison by Sir John Carew Pole at Antony House, near Plymouth.

M. sargentiana seed was collected for the Arnold Arboretum in 1908 and this species was amongst the few seedlings that were sent direct to Kew in 1911. Chenault also sent some seedlings to Kew before commencing to propagate by grafting. Unfortunately none of these survived for long. J.G. Millais writes that most of the plants in this

M. campbellii *and* M. kobus *at Killerton Gardens in Great Britain.*

country were grafted ones from Chenault.[8] However, it seems *M. sargentiana* first flowered in Britain at Nymans, Sussex, in 1932 and James Comber, the garden manager there, recorded that this plant was "a seedling raised from Wilson seed by J. Nix Esq., and was given to him when visiting Tilgate." This tree still exists in the walled garden at Nymans.[9]

M. sargentiana* var. *robusta Grafted plants were distributed from Chenault and first flowered in Britain at Caerhays in 1931 at about 17 years of age. Seedlings of this tree and of another original grafted plant there which flowered a few years later, have since flowered at about twelve years of age. George Johnstone felt that this variety should be regarded as a separate species[4] and this view is supported by Nigel Holman[6] and Neil Treseder[10]. However, the eminent Magnolia authority, J.E. Dandy, could

not agree. This is still a matter of contention. The seedlings of the original grafted plants and a second generation grown from these have shown no reversion to the type species, although they have grown more vigorously, being on their own roots. Generally this variety is much preferred to the type. The flowers are larger, being up to 12 inches across and better displayed. Lord Aberconway once described them graphically if somewhat prosaically as being "like gramophone trumpets." There is a fine tree planted out in an open space at Leonardslee, Horsham, Sussex, where it withstands buffeting by the winds. Another planted out in 1946 at Windsor Great Park flowered 12 years later and has done so ever since, being undamaged in the ferocious winter of 1962-63.

M. sprengeri* var *diva Wilson's seed lot W688 was apparently a small one. Seedlings were raised and grown on at the Coombe Wood nursery of Messrs. Veitch. In 1913 Sir Harry Veitch sold

Magnolia 'Charles Coates' in Sir Peter Smithers's garden in Switzerland.

up and these plants went to at least three gardens; Bodnant, Caerhays and Kew. Wilson was under the impression that he had collected the wild form of *M. denudata (heptapeta)* calling it *M. denudata* var. *purpurascens*. However, when one of the plants at Caerhays began to flower around 1925 it was clearly something new. The late J.C. Williams sent specimens to Kew for examination by Dr. Otto Stapf, who thought it a new species and decided to name the lovely new magnolia *diva* which means "goddess." However, J.E. Dandy, working on magnolias at the time, drew Dr. Stapf's attention to Pampanini's herbarium material of *M. sprengeri*, which matched the new magnolia, and in collaboration they agreed on the name *M. sprengeri* var. *diva*. If ever a flowering tree was well named it is this one, and no doubt it inspires many who see it in its full glory to become disciples of this goddess in particular and magnolias in general. Eventually J.C. Williams distributed seedlings fairly widely. Some of these have been disappointing and were possibly hybrids; others have been as good, and in some cases improvements, if that is possible, yielding flowers of a deeper colour. Outstanding amongst these is one growing at Copeland Court, now a part of Truro Cathedral School. Although Lord Aberconway of Bodnant had some plants of the same seed lot, none of these turned out to be the same form as Diva, nor did those at Kew. Ironically, a seedling thought to have come from the tree at Caerhays and planted at Bodnant produced an excellent flower and has been given the cultivar name Claret Cup. It received a RHS award of merit in 1963.

M. sprengeri* var. *elongata All other plants from the same seed lot that produced var. *diva* gave rise to a much less spectacular variety, subsequently named *M. sprengeri* var. *elongata*. Original plants of this still exist at

Bodnant and Kew. George Johnstone discerned two forms amongst these plants—pure white flowers and cream. Lord Aberconway wrote in 1940: "It has flowers of the shape but not quite the quality of *M. conspicua (denudata/heptapata)* and differs in being a real tree with no tendency to form a bush. It is a very fine magnolia."[12]

For a masterly account of the problems that still surround the *M. spengeri* varieties, there is a fine article by Philip J. Savage Jr. in the Newsletter of the American Magnolia Society (now MAGNOLIA) vol. 6 No. 2. Nov. 1969.

M. sinensis seed was collected by Wilson in 1908. The resulting seedlings were sent from Arnold to Chenault for propagation. However, before 1930 this magnolia was sent out as *M. nicholsoniana;* to add to the confusion, this name was originally given to a magnolia now known as *M. wilsonii. M. sinensis* is easily raised from seed and flowers when about five to seven years of age. It grows as a rather sprawling shrubby tree in quite a number of woodland gardens, and will thrive on a chalk soil.

M. wilsonii. Like *M. sinensis* it grows readily from seed and indeed is the only magnolia I know of that sows itself in British woodland gardens. The original cultivated plants distributed, were grafted ones from Chenault. It appears to have been improved in cultivation by a process of garden selection, many seedling forms being better than one grown at Borde Hill, which was certainly raised from seed collected in China. It is fairly widely grown in woodland gardens. A form with double flowers, a Caerhays seedling, grows at Wakehurst Place, Sussex. *M.* × *highdownensis* resulted from some unlabelled seedlings from Caerhays grown on by the late Sir Frederick Sterne at Highdown. It is generally thought to be a hybrid between *M. sinensis* and *M. wilsonii.*

Magnolia campbellii *var.* mollicomata *at Dumbarton, Scotland.*

However George Johnstone[4] and H.G. Hillier and Roy Lancaster[7] consider it to be a form of *wilsonii;* this opinion is supported by Dr. Stephen Spongberg[2], but Nigel Holman[6], who considers *M. highdownensis* a better plant than either of its supposed parents, feels it may be a form of *M. sinensis.* I have so far not found a plant of *M. wilsonii* var. *nicholsoniana.* It is possible there were some of these at Kew, and that they died out. *M. wilsonii* is a lovely magnolia and one of my favourites but it does not seem to be very long lived.

There are many problems concerning the Wilson Magnolias, a few mentioned here. In some cases herbarium material is scanty and incomplete. The likelihood is that only further collections in China will provide better answers and such collecting has been impossible for many years. Recent changes, however, raise hope of a time when wide ranging collections of material can eventually be made and these problems can be resolved.

Wilson tramped many weary miles in rain and mist, unable to see farther than a few yards. Having travelled over terrain in East Nepal similar to that of the gorges in Western China, I know

how difficult it is to move very far off an established track. It may not be too much to hope, therefore, that there just might be another magnolia or two waiting to be discovered, unknown, as yet, to the West.

Brian Savage gardens at his home in Worcester and has visited widely among gardens in the British Isles and elsewhere.

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The Gardens at Bath

"Bath, England, held the unexpected jewel. We arrived in the middle of the morning and the driver dropped us in the center of town... After lunch, most of the group went to see the old Roman baths, but I felt a cold coming on so decided to return to the hotel and rest. The bus zig-zagged up the hill on crescent-shaped streets and suddenly the driver announced: 'Botanical Gardens!' So off I went. I entered through a small wooden gate almost hidden by shrubs and trees in a wooded area...There was no fee. Neither was there a gift shop, tearoom, or any other sign of commercial activity—just a sense of peaceful quiet.

"The Bath gardens were on a gently sloping southern exposure with small knolls and valleys where streams leveled off occasionally into little pools, edged with maples, ferns, lilies, and much more.

"The Magnolias, soulangianas for the most part, were very large old specimens, beautifully spaced, some with 40-foot spread. Their long branches, horizontally sweeping the lawn, were so low and thick it was impossible to get inside the perimeter. There were several: 'Alba,' pure white, others white with pale pink base, and 'Alexandrina,' white with narrower tepals and smaller blooms than 'Alba.' True, I guess, the larger and older the tree, the smaller the blooms. An exception was 'Lennei,' with large blossoms, dark rose outside and pale pink inside. All the soulangianas seemed much lighter hued and with smaller blossoms than here in California. *M. liliflora nigra* was also in this grouping—a lovely contrast with its dark purple against the paler pinks and whites. To stand there on the lawn, and see one enormous mass of color silhouetted against another and then another—was breathtaking—for they were all at their peak. It was beautifully maintained—not a gardener or maintenance man or a litter box in sight." —Katherine Hinman in a Round Robin letter.