

# Thanks for the Memories

by Philip J. Savage, Jr.

Sitting here in my study, or den, the name depending on your age group, I can see on the bookshelves the well worn spines of most of Ernest Henry Wilson's books. I see "Aristocrats of the Garden," and its companion, "More Aristocrats of the Garden." Next comes "Aristocrats of the Trees," berthed beside the original two-volume edition of "A Naturalist in Western China," published in 1913, and followed by his descriptive guide to the Arnold Arboretum, "America's Greatest Garden."

On a lower shelf, because of its larger size, rests his last, and possibly most expensive effort, "If I Were to Make a Garden." On the inside cover of this deluxe edition is the 1931 price, five dollars! This book was published after the terrible automobile accident that took the lives of Wilson and his wife Ellen, after whom some very worthwhile plants are named. The Foreword, beautifully written by Mr. Richardson Wright, the well remembered editor of *House and Garden* magazine, and a close friend of the Wilsons, measures the remarkable scope of the man's achievements.

My mother loved these books and read favorite chapters over and over, quite often aloud to me. It is not surprising that the sight and handling of them now produces strong feelings of nostalgia. Some years ago, *New Yorker* magazine ran a delightful series of articles by S.J. Perelman entitled "Cloudland Revisited," which were nostalgia trips through novels that had thrilled the writer in his youth. For the

most part, I feel that way about Wilson's books.

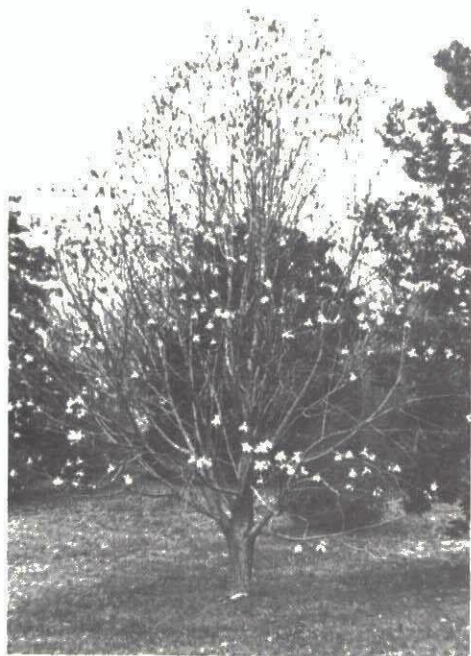
I say "for the most part," because even as a boy I felt frustrated by his brevity in describing individual plant species and forms, when the hunger for such description was my main reason for reading his books. The huge number of plants he covered forced him to buzz wildly from flower to flower like a bumblebee on fermented honey. A more acute frustration, mentioned a few years back in these pages, was my discovery, with pain I can still remember, that in both volumes of "A Naturalist in Western China," *Magnolias* are mentioned a



*Magnolia campbellii* var. *mollicomata*.

grand total of six times, and then in only the most general and offhand way. He would write, "*Magnolia officinalis* grown hereabouts for its bark, used in tonic medicines."

This, by the way, is the only species of the Magnoliaceae mentioned by name in the entire two large volumes, and it is mentioned, with the approximate wording above, three times! *Spirea* and *Ribes* got pages, while *Magnolias* got short, terse sentences. I began to think Wilson disliked *Magnolias* because the seeds were hard to harvest and perishable. Since he refers to himself in the title as a naturalist, rather than purely a botanist or horticulturist, he had room to expand into zoology, which he handled very well indeed. Descriptions of birds and mammals collected by Mr. Walter R. Zappey, the zoologist sent out by the Harvard Museum of Comparative Zoology, are written by Wilson with deep understanding and detail.



*Magnolia sprengeri* 'Diva.'

A foldout map is provided in "A Naturalist in Western China," and dotted lines appear to lay out a travel route more difficult to follow than the track of a thoroughly alarmed fox. Many years later I learned the reason for my inability to correlate the map with the text when I read Mr. E.H.M. Cox's wonderful book, "Plant Hunting in China." In one chapter on "The Wilson Era," Mr. Cox writes: "It is difficult from Wilson's writings to work out the exact itineraries of his various journeys. His main book on his travels, 'A Naturalist in Western China,' if read in a careless manner, seems like the narrative of one consecutive journey. Actually it is made up of sections from his itineraries of 1903-1905, 1907-1908 and 1910-1911."

I am sure Mr. Cox is right about the careless manner, but when routes reverse in mid-step and there are sudden changes of cast and characters, it makes you feel as if a few chapters of "David Copperfield" had been sewn at random into your copy of "Great Expectations."

I suppose it is not surprising that the late Mr. Cox, founder of Glendoick Gardens in Perth, Scotland, should have mastered Wilson's maze so easily. He was a "China hand" himself and made a collecting trip to Kansu Province with Reginald Farrer, directly after World War I. If you have read Farrer's books, "On the Eaves of the World" and "The Rainbow Bridge," you will know that he added a completely new dimension to trail-confusing that bested Wilson's wildest dreams. If Farrer didn't care for the name of a Chinese town, river, or mountain range, he invented a new name on the spot. Have you ever tried to find the Satane Alps on a map of China? Surviving a trip with Farrer indicates what an uncheckable foxhound Mr. Cox must have been in those days. He also displays a most



kindly and charitable nature toward other plant hunters which was not always the rule followed in that surprisingly competitive profession.

If you can locate a copy of "Plant Hunting in China," by E.H.M. Cox, published in 1945 by Wm. Collins, Sons & Co., Norwich, and re-printed by Jarrold & Sons Ltd., Norwich, in the 1960's, by all means obtain it. You will enjoy it greatly.

By the time Ernest Wilson wrote "Aristocrats of the Garden" in 1926, his awareness of Magnolias seems to have improved and he allocated several pages to our favorite genus. He still insisted on lumping *M. denudata* and *M. sprengeri* under the former name, despite the strong objections of Dr. Otto Stapf, Mr. J.E. Dandy, and Mr. W.J. Bean. He wrote: "The white form is rare in a wild state, and that most usually met with has rosy, or reddish pink flowers. This variety has long been cultivated in China, and also in Japan, where it is known as 'Sarasarengé,' and in Japanese nursery catalogs as *M. obovata* var. *discolor*, though correctly it should be *M. denudata* var. *purpurascens*." Further on, in the same paragraph, he writes, "Both the white and colored varieties of the Yulan are trees fifty feet tall, with a trunk eight feet in girth, and have ascending and spreading branches. Such trees I have seen in the forests of Central China, laden with thousands of flowers, and the spectacle they presented will never be forgotten."

My feeling that at long last Wilson was coming around to an appreciation of the Magnoliaceae was strengthened four years later, in 1930, when he favored Magnolias with a ten-page chapter and three full page illustrations in "Aristocrats of the Trees," even giving the genus title billing with the chapter heading, "Aristocratic Magnolias." He still stuck to the old nomenclature, but added a note regarding what he called *M. denudata*

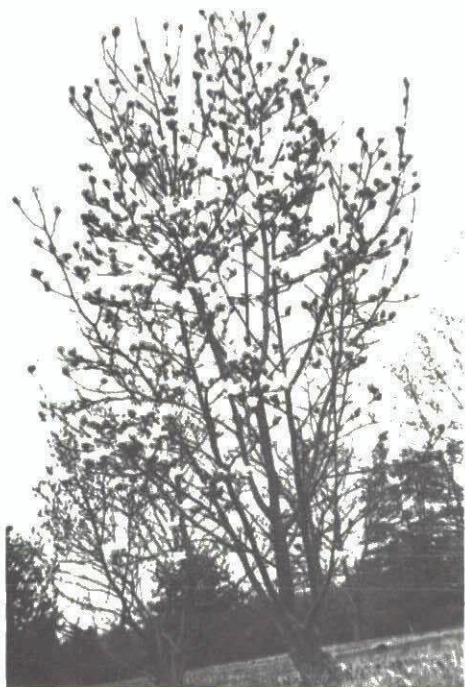


*Magnolia sprengeri* 'Diva' buds.

var. *purpurascens*, "which has flowers rose-red without, rosy-pink within. I shall ever remember my first sight of the wild tree of this Magnolia. It was a fine specimen fully sixty feet tall, with a broad, more or less pyramidal crown and was laden with thousands of fully expanded blossoms. Never again did I see such a magnificent example of this Magnolia illumining the woodland landscapes of China."

This particular tree, certainly "The Goddess of Changyang Hsien," and the mother of Caerhays's 'Diva,' must have been growing by a busy roadside or in an open farmyard, or beside a temple, because it seems to have been well known to Dr. Augustine Henry and others who traveled the rather short distance from the river-port of I-Chang south to the district of Changyang. A great many specimens, many no doubt from this conspicuous individual, are in the Harvard Herbarium, including a large and thick, rectangular slab of bark and wood, chopped out of the trunk in the true imperial manner, by the Wilson party!

Wilson's explanations of why he and Dr. Alfred Rehder did not recognize this remarkable tree as a "nova" of



*Magnolia denudata* at U.S. National Arboretum, Washington.

great ornamental value are awfully hard to swallow. His statement that the leaves on the few surviving seedlings at the Coombe Wood Nursery were narrow and suggested those of the Japanese *M. salicifolia*, and were not a bit like those of any Yulan, is astonishing, to say the least. Young Magnolias usually have leaves as large or even larger than adults of the same species.

The specimens labeled *M. denudata* var. *purpurascens* that Wilson collected in Japan, and which are under several numbers in the Harvard Herbarium, look exactly like *M. x soulangiana* clones, or perhaps seedlings, and he notes they were collected "in a garden" in Tokyo in 1914. Ernest Wilson was much too perceptive a botanist to have mistaken the glorious pink goddess for any clone of *M. x soulangiana* and of course many of the clones of that grex in commerce today were established in the nursery trade in the 1870's.

Whatever his reasons, and despite the confusions in her past, we all must agree with him that it was only by a stroke of heavenly luck that Mr. J.C. Williams bought the infant 'Diva' at the Coombe Wood sale!

Now that the diplomatic situation between the United States and China has become more rational, we may hope it is still possible to determine the inter-relationships of the taxa assigned to subgenus *Yulania* at first hand, and to solve the puzzle of the two quite distinct forms of *M. sprengeri*. We are probably quite close to learning if there are native trees of *M. sprengeri* remaining in parks and temple grounds up north in Ho-Nan Province, where Joseph Hers collected ample specimens in the early 1920's, and whence came the seeds of *M. biondii* that the Arnold Arboretum and Joe McDaniel received from Prof. Ting two years ago.

It is unfortunate that none of the beautifully prepared specimens of *M. sprengeri* collected by Hers in Ho-Nan are flowering, and I could not find descriptions of such flowers, although they may well exist. Some years back Dr. Otto Stapf researched the Hers collections and found variations in leaf shape and pubescence among those Ho-Nan specimens that were similar to the differences between the pink and the white flowering specimens of Henry and Wilson from Hupeh. Among several rather puzzling specimens of the Hers Magnolias is a leafless twig whose terminal bud looks like *M. sieboldii*. I mentioned this in a letter to Mr. J.E. Dandy, but failed to convince him. It might, of course, have been a cultivation escape.

Unlike some plant hunters, Ernest Wilson played by the rules and did not claim discoveries made earlier by someone else. Before going to China for the first time he went to France and studied the diary and specimens of Abbe' David, and it will be noted that he credits this perfectly delightful man with the discovery of *M. dawsoniana* in





*Magnolia officinalis* in Phil Seitner's garden.

the principality of Muping in 1869. In his diary, Father David writes after the date of April 15: "In the midst of a damp forest I find a magnificent *Magnolia* with purplish flowers, still without leaves." Also in Muping, David collected *M. officinalis* and the *Magnolia* now known as *M. sargentiana*, all three in 1869. He also introduced to western science the Giant Panda whose cuddly images have made so many toy manufacturers rich and happy.

Abbe' David's diary, translated and edited by Helen M. Fox with the encouragement and help of Dr. Elmer D. Merrill, was published by the Harvard University Press in 1949, and may still be available from them. The Arnold Arboretum's fine *Magnolia* introduction, 'Merrill,' is named after the Doctor. Both are excellent.

Wilson gives Dr. Augustine Henry credit for the first recorded collection of *M. sprengeri* in 1888, and no doubt the good Doctor steered him to the tree we have discussed, since Henry had a lodge or "summer cottage" in Changyang Hsien which he loaned to visitors such as Wilson, Antwerp Pratt, and others. That this lodge was not your typical suburban fishing and boating type is indicated by the first of Pratt's collections: a tiger that had killed a farmer's pony next door the previous night.

Augustine Henry, Abbe' David, and two or three dozen botanists may have found plants first, and sent their dried leaves home, but Ernest Wilson sent the seeds, and to gardeners like ourselves, he is the man who made it happen.

Scientific writings and reports are inclined to be dry, but Wilson's are not. His observation was razor sharp and there was a relish in his prose that often failed to appear when he wrote for general public consumption. I previously mentioned his maddening brevity and when I re-read "America's Greatest Garden" I learned that this was not mere over-editing but calculated style. In the preface he wrote: "Brevity of description combined with rigid accuracy are the keynotes." But when describing a magnificent sunset, or a magnificent *Magnolia*, is it so imperative to strive for brevity?

The unpublished manuscript printed in this issue, generously given to the Arnold Arboretum by Mrs. John R. Abbott and made available to *MAGNOLIA* by Dr. Richard A. Howard, is fascinating reading. This is Ernest Wilson at his best. I have the feeling that he intended this book for horticulturists rather than home improvement gardeners. He had a different style for each, and his writings for the "specialist" segments are worthy fare indeed.

The water is too long over the dam and we will never know why such a short and abortive attempt was made to grow Wilson's Chinese *Magnolias* at the Arnold Arboretum. Though shortage of staff, budget cuts or other practical deterrents no doubt had a part in his decisions, it is a pity that Dr. Charles S. Sargent had such a defeatist attitude about growing *M. dawsoniana*, *M. sargentiana* and its variety *robusta*, and even *M. wilsonii*—all named for members of the Arnold staff—in the widely varying climates of the United States. That seedlings of

newly introduced Chinese Magnolias were sent to a famous nursery in France is in no way surprising. The shocker is that all of them were sent out of the United States and to one nursery in France.

I feel sure many of these Wilson seedlings must still be growing on some of the magnificent French estates, such as Cleres in Normandy, home of the world famous ornithologist Jean Delacour. Our society should make an attempt to locate such surviving seedlings for horticulture as well as botany. Interesting intergrades between *M. sargentiana* and its variety *robusta* might well be found there with a bit of effort.

I am looking forward hungrily to our meeting at the Arnold next spring. A few years back Dick Howard was kind enough to let me look through the specimens of the Magnoliaceae at the Harvard Herbarium to my heart's content, and when I held in my hand the folder containing the type specimen of *M. dawsoniana* and saw Wilson's faded pencil note on the margin, "Tachienlu--to the south-east," for a moment I stood gazing from a peak in Szechwan.

## About Seed Testing

The last issue published in June, 1980 included an article by Harry Heineman asking that members keep records on their sowing and germination of Magnolia seeds from the Society's Seed Counter. Harry has some theories on seed storage, shipment, and handling and he wants to gather information from members about their experiences. For details, see Harry's article in the last issue.

Most people had already planted their seeds received for 1980 by the time they read Harry's proposal, and he has asked us to put a special notice in this issue urging members to keep

records on their planting techniques and results when they receive seed to be planted in 1981, and to send him the results.

We should note here that not everybody agrees with Harry on the best way to handle and store seeds and we are likely to have something on the varying views in this or subsequent issues. Such studies as the one Harry hopes to conduct should be helpful to those who are involved in the Seed Counter, either as contributors or as purchasers.

## Fringe Benefits

Two substantial benefits of membership in the American Magnolia Society are its Seed Counter and its Pollen Bank. Another popular activity is the Round Robin letters that circulate among members carrying the observations and comments of members concerning Magnolias.

The Seed Counter is a program through which members and friends of the Society contribute seeds of Magnolias and a few other desirable plants for purchase by other members. The profits go to the Society's treasury.

The Pollen Bank—just started in 1980—operates the same way. Contributed Magnolia pollens are stored and sold to members who desire particular ones for breeding projects.

The Round Robin groups—there are about a half-dozen "robins," each with six or eight continuing members—pass around a stack of letters contributed by all the correspondents in the group, each adding his bit and mailing it on.

Names and addresses of the appropriate chairmen are on page 2 of each issue.