

# A Gathering of the Clan

by Harold Hopkins

Two seven-foot sapling Magnolias with trunks only a half-inch thick are standing less than a foot apart. One is *Magnolia grandiflora* and the other *Magnolia acuminata*. In this part of south Mississippi, 60 or 70 miles from the Gulf of Mexico, both can reach timber size. Since tree farming in these parts is a major industry, conversion to timber is not an unlikely prospect for either species.

On their way upward to the size that puts them in the timber class, which of these dendrological dandies will smother the other and become the sawyer's plunder? Or will they perhaps grow up in clannish togetherness, embrace each other, and splice together in a true lovers knot—to form some kind of Magnolia conglomerate?

And what destiny awaits three entirely different Magnolia species growing just a few feet away, within or just out of arm's reach? One of these others, *Magnolia virginiana*, can also end up as timber. The remaining two, *Magnolia macrophylla* and *M. pyramidata* (*M. fraseri* var. *pyramidata*) are either soft and brittle wooded or skinny, and belong more properly in the pulpwood class.

Shades of Barnum and Ripley! What monkeyshines of nature can ever follow this biological act, in which five primitive inhabitants of a tiny enclave that is really a miniature climax forest stand around like mothers showing off their children at a family reunion! A kind of evolution in reverse.

Around the steep-banked, moist, pungent, rich cove or ravine, where intermittent seeps of water dispense

their tribute to a small stream below, are a series of interconnected ridges, some hogbacked, that lip similar ravines, most so steep that climbing is done by grabbing at shrubs firmly or tenuously rooted in the damp leaf mold. Scattered throughout the area, down in the ravine and up along the ridges well dispersed among our five American Magnolias in their woodland setting, are many other captivating plants of high ornamental calibre, showing their treasures only to each other in the wooded quietness. All are poised like forest quadrupeds awaiting their turn around a waterhole. This



*Stems of M. grandiflora and M. acuminata seedlings rise in center of picture.*

scene--this spot--should, one would think, be the most unusual on earth, for Magnolia lovers anyway. But it's really not unique. Another site less than a dozen miles away contains the same five magnolia species and very similar topography, differing mainly in a slight variation of its mix of companion plants. But we're getting ahead of our story...

It was about two years ago that I first heard talk, and it still seems almost like a fairy tale, about a wooded location near Mobile, Alabama, where six Magnolia species had been found growing within a stone's throw of each other. I was electrified. For the "lumper" of Magnolia species names (I'm a "splitter," myself) this includes every Magnolia in the book, the whole shebang of Magnolias native to the United States--enough to make even a splitter's mouth fly open. The spot that I ultimately saw in person was actually in the southern part of Mississippi, and of the six U.S. species recognized by the "lumpers," one, *Magnolia tripetala*, was not represented--though I have no doubt Mother Nature is working on that.



John Giordano, tumbler in hand, stops to admire *M. pyramidata*.

I have since been informed that near the town of Butler, Alabama, at a spot known locally as "The Top of the Mountain," there are indeed six species--all the aforementioned, plus *Magnolia tripetala*. I have no regrets at missing this site this time. I can look ahead to another vacation to view Alabama's offerings. Maybe the Guinness Book of Records will hold a page open. If not, MAGNOLIA will in any case.

One of the discoverers of these Dixie delights is Dr. John Giordano, a Mississippian who is now a physician in the Mobile area; another was Dr. John Smith, a Mobile dentist. Both are avid plant hunters and both are members of our society. There may be others in their group, perhaps enough to set up a clinic. I have to confess that on this hottest of July days, in the pursuit of so many Magnolias in a pack, and only 40 or so miles from where I was born and bred, I became too excited to ask all the proper questions. But there I go getting ahead of my story again...

I had at the time, two years ago, written to urge John Giordano to do an article for MAGNOLIA on the woodland wonder he had uncovered, but I received no answer and it eventually became clear that he is one of those people who do all their distance communicating by telephone: clear, that is, when I began receiving calls from roadside phone booths or from the U.S. National Arboretum where John always stops when he passes through the area. He travels to various points in the eastern United States on plant exploration trips for magnolias, hollies, and azaleas, the generic trio that lure him away from his work, with increasing frequency.

So when he called me in June and I casually mentioned I was planning to be in my home state on vacation, we arranged a rendezvous at Hattiesburg,

a south Mississippi town perhaps best known for its adjacency to Camp Shelby--familiar to thousands of servicemen during the two World Wars as one of the country's largest military training centers. We planned an early morning start to get some of our respective highway driving out of the way while the day was still cool and also to give us more time during the middle of the day for our ramble in the woods. "I'll be driving a Subaru station wagon," John told me.

John bought his Subaru especially for plant exploring. It has a four-wheel drive, good ground clearance, and skid plates underneath to protect the exhaust system, oil pan, and other vital parts from rocks and stumps. On the front is a heavy, snoutlike bumper enclosing a winch. I was not particularly impressed. I have owned several Jeeps and a secondhand Land Rover 109 whose former owner insisted the dent in the front fender, which he claimed was made by an angered rhinoceros, added to its intrinsic value. Compared to these homely, rough and ready chariots a Subaru looks like a Shetland pony grazing alongside a Percheron. I was due for a bit of enlightenment.

Before we got out of Hattiesburg, I showed him a couple of spiny-leaved Mediterranean oaks on the grounds of the Forest County General Hospital. This is called the Kermes Oak (*Quercus coccifera*), and I hope that John or some other nearby friend of the Society can obtain some of the acorns with which the trees were laden, when ripe, for distribution to those Society members who live in latitudes where this attractive evergreen will thrive.

The oaks duly admired, we drove several miles down U.S. highway 49, which runs straight south to the Gulf's resort areas and on the way passes the Camp Shelby military reservation, our destination. At Camp Shelby, we



*Examining leaf of M. pyramidata.*

outlined our intentions to Col. Theodore Stuart, the officer in charge, and received the necessary permission to roam the out back part of the reservation, an area not much used in peacetime except for training exercises by the Army National Guard in the summer, and at other times by military men who have noted the deer and turkey signs and return during hunting season for an encore. It was in this relatively undisturbed area that our Magnolia colony was located.

Beyond the camp's permanent military installations, the dirt roads had not been cleared of the debris left a year earlier by Hurricane Frederick, which played Merry Ned in south Mississippi, roaring capriciously inland, warping and snapping tall pines like so many matchsticks. No signs marked these out back roads, so John was obliged to rely on his sense of direction and his remembrance of things past to home in on our nest of Magnolias.

It was then I learned why John had chosen the Subaru. When he was unable to detour through the brush, around a set of deep ruts, or around a fallen pine log, he didn't waste time reconnoitering, but bulled straight ahead, ignoring the brush slapping the windshield, the skid plate scraping the high middles and the four-wheel drive powering the car over logs seven or eight inches in diameter. At last we came to a log two feet off the ground,

one that even a Subaru couldn't go over or under, and the surrounding upright timber so dense we couldn't skirt it. But by this time we were close enough to our woodland nymphs to walk the rest of the way. Supplying ourselves with large plastic tumblers filled with water and ice from the cooler to make our jaunt a little more civilized in the intense heat of that July 2, we set forth amongst the pines, scrub oaks, and other dry woods vegetation along an obscure trail, walking until the woods began to turn greener and thicker on the left hand, indicating a stream nearby. We saw some *Magnolia grandiflora*, then some *M. virginiana*, both numerous thereabouts, and finally a *M. pyramidata*. After passing the second *M. pyramidata*, John figured we had reached the right place to turn off the trail.

We had indeed. I never saw such a profusion of Magnolias, not even in river swamp. Somebody more expert at edaphic evaluation than I will have to figure out why Mother Nature reached this particular spot of earth, and decided to go on a binge. I have explored loess deposits in the western and southwestern parts of the State, but being no geologist, I was unable to identify this topography for certain as loess, though I suspect it was. Some of the more unusual plants we noticed were *Illicium floridanum*, several hollies (*Ilex cassine*, *vomitaria*, *glabra*, *coriacea*, *opaca*, and possibly hybrids of the last two), hazelnut and witch hazel, dwarf pawpaw, a few hawthorns, the wild pink azalea (*Rhododendron canescens*), ti ti (*Cyrtia racemiflora*), the red bay (*Persea borbonia*), horse sugar (*Symplocos tinctoria*), sourwood (*Oxydendron arboreum*), chinkapin (*Castanea* spp.) devilwood (*Osmanthus americanus*), sparkleberry (*Vaccinium arboreum*), huckleberry (*Gaylussacia* spp.), *Baccharis halimifolia*, yellow and

loblolly pines, sweetgum (*Liquidambar styraciflua*), and a privet that was possibly an escape.

Thrashing through the brush to embrace yet unseen delights, I found how John manages to reconcile the urges of a plant hunter and the duties of a physician without letting them get in each other's way. As I shuffled along a ridge a guinea wasp zapped me behind the ear and it was like a red hot poker. It burned so emphatically and so entirely that I thought a whole nest of these little hot tails had dive bombed me. After narrowing my wounds to one, I hollered to John to wait up a minute because I'd been stung by a wasp. "Put a piece of ice on it," he said without slowing down or even looking back.

I took a lump out of the tumbler and applied it per doctor's orders. The sting went away while the ice lasted. Then I grabbed some more ice, and began to realize the tumbler was less of a hindrance than I'd thought. A few more pieces and I couldn't even tell where the sting had been.

On our way out of the brush, John spotted a plant he hadn't seen in the area before, *Ilex longipes*, a rather uncommon holly whose ripe berries, when suspended by their long pedicels in the fall, resemble dangling red cherries. I knew this plant was in the area because a Hattiesburg plant hunter and friend, T.O. Warren, had collected and sent seeds of it to me several years ago, and Gene Eisenbeiss has raised several plants from them and is now using them in some hybrid breeding at the U.S. National Arboretum in Washington.

By the time we emerged from the woods, departed the reservation, and located a hamburger stand to attend to our appetites it was too late to drive to Gloster Arboretum over in the southwest part of the state where I'd hoped to visit. Instead we turned south

on U.S. highway 49 and went as far as Black Creek, collecting a few *Stokesia* seedheads along the roadside. Then we worked eastward along back roads, generally following Black Creek in its southeastward meanders. We stopped now and then along swampy roadside spots to see what bountiful Nature had wrought, and at one point took a couple of cuttings off a handsome foliaged *Magnolia grandiflora*. Later we admired a rampant colony of Pitcher Plants (*Sarracenia purpurea*).

On one of these back roads we saw a sign and an arrow saying "W.W. Ashe Nursery," and went to have a quick look at this U.S. Department of Agriculture forest tree nursery--named for the legendary USDA plant explorer of about 50 years ago, W.W. Ashe, for whom *Magnolia ashei* (*M. macrophylla* var. *ashei*) is also named.

We came to the town of New Augusta, then drove over a bridge across Leaf River, much larger here than upriver where I hunted and fished and swam it as a boy. Then we crossed back through town and entered a segment of U.S. highway 98 that runs from Hattiesburg to Mobile. We turned back northwesterly toward Hattiesburg, where my car had been left parked in a shopping mall. About a mile and a half northwest of New Augusta, John stopped the Subaru on the road shoulder at the foot of a steep embankment, and we clambered up it to our second multiple *Magnolia* site of the day. This spot lies along what appears to be the northern edge of the southern part of DeSoto National Forest (which is in two large noncontiguous tracts).

John previously had told me that this second place had a couple of plants we hadn't seen, and it did. One, *Stewartia malacodendron*, is one of the finest spectacles in the woods when in flower. This little tree is unusual in that the top branches extend

horizontally, at least as it grows under the forest canopy, to produce an umbrella-like shape that maximizes the available light received by its leaves. Another plant not seen earlier was the oakleaf hydrangea (*Hydrangea quercifolia*) and a wildflower I took to be arrow arum (*Peltandra virginica*). All these plants had already flowered earlier in the season, as had almost everything else in the woods except *Cyrilla*.

As we made our way to an upper level I also saw most of the other plants we had seen in the morning and was flabbergasted to see all five of the *Magnolia* species we had seen on the Camp Shelby reservation! It took this second colony of *Magnolias* for another thing to soak in on me. The *Magnolia acuminatas*, unlike those I've seen elsewhere, had uniform, almost geometric patterns of light gray narrow vertical bark plates or scales on trunks that went up straight as an arrow for what looked like close to a hundred feet, with long expanses of trunk entirely free of branches until they reached the canopy where the nourishing light was to be had. I wanted to take a close-up picture of this bark pattern but my camera was out of film. This ground must be rich indeed. An enormous red cedar (*Juniperus virginiana*) resembled a Douglas fir in size and spread, a timber prize that almost certainly owed its venerability and continuing existence to the aegis of the national forest signboards.

We had hoped to gather a few seedpods of *Magnolia pyramidata*, the rarest and shyest of the *Magnolias* we saw, but these slender trees were sparsely fruited and none of the cones were closer than 30 feet or so from the ground. Anyway, they didn't look quite ripe enough for collecting. Like others in the genus, the pyramid *magnolia's* longish cones turn a