

Blood Will Tell, But How Much?

by Sir Peter Smithers

It has been a bumper year for seeds on my magnolias in 1982. Plenty of sun and plenty of bees. But this is emphatically not a matter for rejoicing, except in one case, about which more later.

On one plant, *M. 'Lennei Alba'*, the effort the tree expends on bearing the great purple-pink fruits seriously prejudices growth next year, and the weight of the crop is so great that the tree seems in danger of breaking branches, though this has not in fact happened. Consistently heavy but not excessive bearers of fruit are *M. denudata* and its derivatives *M. × veitchii* and the Gresham blondes.

On the other hand plants with a high percentage of *M. liliflora* blood, such as the Gresham brunettes, are shy setters. *M. 'Royal Crown'* has never shown a single pod, *M. 'Raspberry Ice'* only one or two, *M. 'Ruby'* only six pods out of several hundred blooms, *M. 'Lennei'* hardly any. Most interestingly *M. 'Forrest's Pink'* bears a good crop, thus, perhaps, providing a hint that it is indeed a pink form of *M. denudata*. It certainly has no suggestion of *M. liliflora* blood either in appearance or habits. The mysterious *M. 'Picture'* and its progeny conform to the behaviour of the Greshams. Whereas *M. 'Ruby'* sets hardly any seed, the beautiful white *M. 'Opal'* is extremely fertile, and so is the Japanese *M. 'Picture White Giant'*, while *M. 'Picture'* itself is a reluctant seed bearer.

Our *M. campbellii* and allied Magnolias are still too young to give us a clear idea of their fertility, but the single flower on our very large *M. campbellii* 'Caerhays,' the first bloom it

has borne, set a full pod of seed: this I calculate to be a 100 percent result. *M. sargentiana robusta*, dark form, blooming for the first time with four flowers, set two pods. So in the years ahead it looks as though we may have heavy crops of seed on the great tree Magnolias.

In these circumstances it is perhaps not surprising that the Magnolias are beginning to regenerate naturally beneath the trees, just as the Camellias do. This is painful, for hardened gardener though I am, I suffer when I pull up a young Magnolia and throw it away. Besides, who knows? It might have grown up to be the best novelty of all time!

And now for an exciting story! *M × wieseneri* came to Europe from Japan in 1889 for the Paris Exhibition. It is generally assumed to be a hybrid of which *M. hypoleuca* and *M. sieboldii* are the supposed parents. There is no record of seedlings ever having been raised from this Magnolia and only one record, a dubious one in my opinion, of seed ever having been set on it. If in fact the Spetchley Park tree mentioned in Treseder's *Magnolias* (p. 187) was *M. × wieseneri*, it is extraordinary that it set seed 'regularly' and even more so that none of this regular supply of seed was ever cultivated.

Against this background, what was my surprise one fine morning to notice a pod of seed on my plant of *M. × wieseneri*. One pod only. The extraordinary apparition was watched daily and in due course developed and coloured pink, but there was no sign of maturity. Then we had a violent summer gale, and next morning the pod was no longer there. It lay on the

ground some yards away and was carried mournfully to the potting shed. Ambrose Congreve, the great Irish magnolia guru, was visiting at the time. He inspected the immature-looking corpse, and suggested putting it in water for half-an-hour daily in hopes that it might ripen. It seemed a very long shot. And then one day, to my astonishment, dehiscence began, revealing 29 apparently perfect seeds.

As both putative parents, *M. hypoleuca* and *M. sieboldii*, were growing close to *M. × wieseneri*, and were in bloom at the same time, there are three possibilities. The seed results either from a selfing, or it is a backcross to one or other of the parents. In any case the development of the seedlings must be of the greatest interest. So one third of the seeds were sent to Brooklyn Botanic Garden, whose work on the summer-flowering magnolias is well known; one third to Mr. Eisenhut, our local propagator; and one third have been sown here. Like the newspaper serial, I can only add: 'To be continued in our next.'

Meanwhile it is time to send seed to Dennis Ledvina for the annual distribution to members of our Society. I do this with a heavy heart. How many of us will have the strength of mind to label and distribute the seedlings with the word 'seedling' firmly attached? And if we fail to do that, how many plants will go into circulation as *M. 'Forrest's Pink'* or '*Ruby*' though not entitled to be called such without the vital word 'seedling,' thereby adding to the confusion which already exists in the magnolia world from this cause? And this leads me to feel that if people have the patience and enthusiasm to grow magnolias from seed, they might like a note about the seeds they may receive from this garden.

First, all our seed is 'open pollinated' by my bees, in a garden in which some 150 different magnolias are growing in

close proximity. All that one can therefore expect is that some of the characteristics of the mother plant will be transmitted to the seedlings.

However, as any but the very best clones have been ruthlessly discarded to make room for newer material, the quality of the available fathers is remarkably high. It is in fact inevitable that some very interesting and perhaps much superior plants will appear.

No doubt proximity and time of flowering have much to do with the results, so here are some notes on this aspect of the matter.

M. 'Forrest's Pink.' This magnolia stands between *M. 'Picture.'* '*Burgundy'* and '*Ruby.'*' all flowering at once.

M. 'Ruby.' Neighbours of this plant are *M. 'Forrest's Pink'* and '*Opal.'*

M. 'Opal.' Neighbours here are *M. 'Ruby.'* '*Picture White Giant.'* and PP 7 and '*Sayonara'* flowering rather later but also overlapping.

M. 'Picture White Giant.' Neighbours are *M. 'Sundew.'* '*Opal'* and '*Ruby.'*

M. × veitchii var. '*Isca.'* *M. × soulangiana* '*San Jose'* is the nearest neighbour here.

M. denudata, Japanese clone. This has no near neighbour in flower at the same time.

M. 'Picture.' Stands next to *M. 'Lennei Alba.'*

M. 'Burgundy.' Stands between *M. 'Lennei Alba.'* '*Forrest's Pink'* and *× soulangiana* '*Alba Superba.'*

M. 'Sayonara.' Stands next to *M. 'Rouged Alabaster.'*

In the past many of the best magnolias have been open-pollinated seedlings which arose from the great Cornish gardens such as Caerhays. If we had records of this kind in connection with them, much could be deduced which we would now like to know. When in due course members of our society have seedlings in bloom they may find it useful to refer to these notes in order to make conjectures about delicate questions of paternity.