

The Plot Thickens, Watson— er — Wiesener

by Sir Peter Smithers

It is a pity that we can no longer refer to *Magnolia wieseneri* as *M. watsonii*, for the mystery of the origin of this plant becomes more intriguing and more horticulturally important year by year. But the taxonomists have a cast-iron case for the name-change, and so, My Dear Wiesener, we must accept it.

Readers of this journal will remember the portentous event in 1982 when, by the narrowest of margins, we secured in Vico Morcote a pod of viable seed on *M. wieseneri*. There was no reliable and authenticated record in literature of any seed ever being set by this *Magnolia*, and none at all of seedlings having been raised.

Our 29 seeds were divided between our nearby expert propagator Mr. Eisenhut, Brooklyn Botanic Garden, and myself. Mr. Eisenhut and I both germinated some plants in 1983 which grew well and are being treasured for distribution. Last autumn we both concluded that all of the plants appeared identical so far. At the moment of writing in July, with the plants in full growth, they stand about 18 inches high. I begin to think that I detect slight differences in the leaf form and colour of the leafstalks. But in *Magnolias* these things vary with aspect and it is much too early to know if it is significant.

Meanwhile the Wiesener bomb burst with a letter from Mrs. Julian W. Hill of Vineyard Haven, Massachusetts, which reached me early in April. She had read my piece about *M. wieseneri* and seed, and wanted, in effect, to know what all the fuss was about. Her tree of *M. wieseneri* sets several pods of seed every year. Not only that, but like a good society member she had

sent the seed to the seed counter and at least one correspondent had reported successful germination. There was more to come! The origin of her plant was of particular interest. It had not come through the old nursery channels from the old European stocks of this Japanese plant, but had been sent to her, as a graft, by my friend of many years, Dr. Rokujo, direct from Japan.

The first point of interest was of course that the plant sent to Mrs. Hill was a graft, indicating that seedlings are not readily available in Japan. The second was that it might well be a different clone from that in general cultivation in Europe. Treseder states that there are several clones and this may be so, though I have not been able to make direct comparisons and so have no opinion to offer, but if he is right, no doubt they are originally of seedling origin. However, until the material can be examined side by side, this must remain in doubt, particularly as *Magnolias* differ so widely in appearance under different growing conditions.

The next step was, of course, to ask Dr. Rokujo for his views on the plant sent to Mrs. Hill. "...It was a hybrid, but it is not all proven," says the good Doctor, so there we are, back where we started! "This plant is old-fashioned, never known in the wild, has been cultivated in the Kyoto area *since the beginning of the Kyoto Dynasty* (my italics). So it might come from China, or be a sport of *M. salicifolia*. The plant I sent to Mrs. Polly Hill about 30 years ago was obtained at the nursery of Yamamoto not far from Kyoto. Today it is rarely offered in trade. If *Magnolia watsonii* were to be a bigeneric hybrid it might be F_2 not F_1 . Usually F_1 would set a few seeds. So I

share your doubts about the hybrid origin."

It now remains to see if the growth of the seedlings can shed any light upon the remote origins of the plant. The location of our plants will all be recorded in these pages. One will be kept in the garden here, one in that of Dr. Van Veen at Vira Gambarogno nearby on Lago Maggiore, and one has been given to M.C. Foster of White House Farm, Ivy Hatch, Sevenoaks, Kent, England, who is making an extensive Magnolia collection. Others will go to Mount Congreve, Waterford, Ireland and Isola Madre, near Stresa, Italy. Of the one third of the seeds sent to Brooklyn Botanic Garden I can say nothing, since they acknowledged neither the receipt of the seeds nor the separate covering letter explaining what they were. I do, however, know from a friend who made inquiries that the seeds were in fact received at the garden and sown.

But now, what about the missing witnesses? Will the members of our Society who received seed from Mrs. Hill and germinated it, please come forward and tell us where their plants are and what they look like, so that inquiries may proceed? Meanwhile in the wet May and very hot sunny June and July of this year, *M. wieseneri* put on a magnificent show of bloom lasting for ten weeks and perfuming the garden. It set no seed in 1983 in spite of fine weather. If it sets seed this year I shall report it in the stop press, but so far I see nothing which looks like a fertile fruit.

Oliver D. Diller, 79

Ollie Diller, renowned plantsman and a staunch member of the American Magnolia Society and other plant societies, died April 24 in Wooster, Ohio, after an illness of several weeks.

He spent a career in public service involving forestry and horticulture. His work in recent years with elementary

school children in Wooster, in which first and fifth graders in the city's schools each year were given tree seedlings to plant at home, has been featured in this publication. Ollie has headed these programs since 1956 with the cooperation of Wooster civic organizations. In 1977 the sweetbay magnolia, *Magnolia virginiana*, was chosen by Ollie as one of two trees for the program. The other is dogwood. He served as chairman of the Wooster Shade Tree Commission from 1954 until shortly before his death.

Ollie retired in 1970 as curator of Secrest Arboretum, Wooster, a part of the Ohio Agricultural Research and Development Center, which he had joined in 1937 as an assistant forester. He was promoted to associate of the center in 1938 and became professor and chairman of the Department of Forestry in 1950 and also held faculty appointments at Ohio State University. Prior to joining the center he served three years with the U.S. Forest Service.

He had a wide background in conservation, tree establishment and community beautification, maintained his own arboretum in Wooster and worked with a Christmas tree farm. He was author or co-author of more than 60 published pieces. He was active in the Society of American Foresters, American Forestry Association, International Plant Propagators Society, International Shade Tree Conference, Ohio Academy of Science, Izaak Walton League of America, American Association of Botanical Gardens and Arboreta, Holly Society of America, American Rhododendron Society, and the Nature Conservancy.

Since 1965 he had received over a dozen major awards and honors for this conservation work. One arboretum and one park in Wooster have been named for him. He is survived by his wife Eunice, a daughter, two foster daughters, a brother, and five grandchildren.