

On getting magnolia names right

by Sir Peter Smithers

When I began to form a collection of Magnolias at Vico Morcote, at the southern foot of the Alps, I did so with Tresseder's catalogue in my hand. The foreword was authoritative. If one wished to grow the best Magnolias available, they must be vegetatively propagated. Then 'Diva' would come 'Diva,' and 'Lanarth' would be 'Lanarth.' One would know what one was getting. It made eminently good sense, and I decided to plant all the famous clones from the *campbellii-sprengeri-sargentiana* complex in my garden. I was 56 years old at the time. The climate was favourable. A Magnolia which would take 20 or 30 years to flower in England might manage it in half the time here. I looked forward to seeing all of these magnificent plants in bloom in my garden if I could manage to live for, say 15 years. Now it is 15 years later.

In those early days, in spite of a lifelong dedication to gardening, it did not occur to me to doubt that the plants supplied would in fact be the grafted plants of the catalogue preface. The Tresseder catalogue read as follows:

Tresseders' grafted and cutting-raised Magnolias

If you wanted to plant a Cox's Orange Apple you would not dream of buying a tree raised from a pip. You would buy a budded or grafted tree of the named clone or cultivar which would eventually produce Cox's Orange Apples identical to those of the original parent. Although Magnolias may not vary as greatly as apples from seed, they usually take many years to reach flowering maturity so that there is always a long wait before the flowering potential of the seedling can be assessed. Will it be worthy of the space and situation which it occupies?

We are now able to offer certified clones from most of the best forms of the Asian and many of the American species, together with some of their best hybrids. Our stocks of each are limited so that some varieties may be fully booked by the time your order is received. In such instances we will automatically give you priority from next season's stock. All plants have been carefully vetted and coded to avoid errors in identification.

I could not have put it better or more unequivocally myself, and I placed a large order during 1970-71 and in subsequent years, never doubting that what I was sent was what I had ordered: grafted or cutting-grown plants. When after four years a Wisteria from the same nursery, sent as the 'Black Dragon', turned out in fact to be the 'White Snake', my doubts were still not aroused. Then came the excitement of the flowering of the first of the great tree Magnolias, *sprengeri* 'Claret Cup'. As an Oxford undergraduate I had consumed gallons of that estimable beverage. I anticipated the fine deep colour of the grafted plant from the Bodnant A.M. tree. A flower bud split, showing — a *pale blush petal, almost white*. Claret Cup of that colour would have gone down the drain in my Oxford days.

Wishful thinking is in the nature of man. Perhaps 'Claret Cup' and the 'White Snake' were just a temporary aberration. A nursery foreman had had an off day. I looked forward to the flowering of *Magnolia campbellii alba* 'Caerhays,' FCC, the fabulous and best of all white *Campbelliis*, now showing one bud high up in the tree. It was a large tree. I watched the bud as it swelled from day to day, using low powered binoculars for the purpose. It

split open, revealing — *deep pink petals*.

It now became clear to me that what I had been sent from the nursery were

Received as	Is in fact	Action
<i>Campbellii</i> 'Caerhays' FCC	<i>campbellii</i> × <i>sargentiana robusta</i>	Very fine, kept.
<i>Campbellii alba</i> 'Caerhays' FCC	<i>campbellii</i> × <i>sargentiana robusta</i>	Quite good pink, kept.
<i>Campbellii</i> 'Darjeeling'	Pink <i>sargentiana robusta</i>	Quite good, kept.
<i>Campbellii</i> 'Landicla'	Apparently true	
<i>Campbellii</i> 'Veitchii'	Poor colours	Just worth keeping.
Chyverton 'Hawk'	A pallid weed	Cut down and burned.
Chyverton 'Buzzard'	A pallid 24-petal <i>sargentiana robusta</i> seedling	Kept as a curiosity.
'Caerhays Belle'	A pallid weed	Cut down and burned.
<i>Sprengeri</i> 'Claret Cup'	Pale blush <i>campbellii</i> × <i>sargentiana robusta</i>	Just worth keeping.
<i>Sargentiana robusta</i> dark form	A small bright pink self <i>campbellii</i> -style flower on a <i>sargentiana robusta</i> -type plant. Very pretty	Unusual and well worth keeping.
<i>Sargentiana robusta</i> 'Chyverton' dark form	A fairly good pink but not dark.	Worth keeping.
<i>Campbellii</i> 'Lanarth'	Not yet flowered	Not a graft.
<i>Sprengeri</i> 'Copeland Court'	Not yet flowered	Not a graft.
<i>Sprengeri</i> 'Diva'	One bloom, perhaps true	
<i>Dawsoniana</i> 'Chyverton'	Not yet flowered	
'Anne Rosse'	Apparently true	
'Kew's Surprise'	Not yet flowered	

I am anxious that the above should appear in print for two reasons. First of all, because at a time when I never questioned that I was receiving the grafted or cutting-grown plants which I was offered and had paid for, I had given away scions to many friends who were members of this Society. So that they do not in turn have a disappointment, they should know the facts about these plants. As soon as the situation became clear to me, I at once stopped giving away scions of any Treseder plant which had not flowered and been proved true.

I was rather severely taken to task for this by a respected member of our Society, but I am impenitent. Consider my position. I could start all over again and plant the right things if I could get them. When they reached maturity I would be 86 years old if still around. I now have no appreciable chance of fulfilling a lifelong ambition to grow those famous trees and see them flower as mature specimens. I am anxious that nobody else should have a similar disappointment and that a finer could be pointed to me.

in fact seedlings, and I awaited the rest of the blooming with trepidation. The results at the end of my 15 years wait, are as follows:

Unless there are to be many other such disappointments, it is absolutely necessary that some attempt be made to restore order in the nomenclature of Magnolias. There is no excuse for anybody to call a seedling Magnolia by the name of its seed parent, and the fact that this has so often been done is a minor horticultural disaster. One reads about people who have "a good form of 'Diva.'" There is only one form of 'Diva,' that growing at Chyverton and plants vegetatively propagated from it. All others are 'Diva' seedlings and all seedlings are a lottery unless the parent plant is a pure and invariable species and has been selfed under controlled conditions. I think that all seeds from that excellent institution, the seed counter, should have a warning printed on the packet stating that the seedlings are not entitled to be called by the name of the seed parent without the qualifying word 'seedling.'

The Treseder Nursery is now out of business. The name of the Treseder family is an honoured one in the world of Magnolias. I owe it to Mr. Andrew Treseder to express my gratitude for