

Magnolias as house plants

by Richard B. Figlar

Though house plants have always been desirable as inside adornments, during the last couple of decades indoor plants and trees have become standard items for homeowners and absolute necessities for interior decorators. The size of the indoor plant industry, now in the multibillion dollar category, certainly attests to this. So what kind of house plants does a magnolia enthusiast grow in his or her house—a *Ficus benjamina*, *F. lyrata* (fiddle-leaved fig), or perhaps a gardenia or two? Not this magnolia fan, I grow—what else?—magnolias. And they perform just great.

This experiment with magnolias as house plants actually began 6 or 7 years ago when we acquired plants of *Magnolia coco*, *M. delavayi*, and *M. virginiana* 'Glades.' What we wanted out of this effort was what anyone would want from a good house plant—fine foliage; minimal care requirements; and most important, toleration of the very dry indoor conditions we all normally experience in our home during the colder months.

As we soon found out, not only did all three taxa make good house plants, but they flowered nicely, two of these throughout the year. Recently we added a couple more species to the study, *M. splendens* and *M. portoricensis*. Our indoor data is still incomplete for these two species, but I'll offer preliminary analysis of their attributes.

Magnolia coco. If I had to pick just one magnolia for a house plant, it would be *M. coco*. Its extremely slow growth rate and fragrance, and its long season of flowering make it ideal for indoor cultivation. *M. coco* has elliptic to oblanceolate, coriaceous leaves, shiny dark green above and glabrous

light green on the undersides. The prominent reticulate venation gives the surfaces of the 6 inch long leaves a pustular instead of a smooth appearance. The small nodding flowers are 1½-2 inches in diameter with 3 light green sepals and 6 very white petals. The flowers are very fragrant.

We obtained our plant of *M. coco* in 1979 from a fellow Magnolia Society member Chris Early. Since that time it has grown only 18 inches but it has produced over 100 flowers (see Table 3). Although our overall qualitative rating (Table 1) shows it second to *M. virginiana* 'Glades,' *M. coco* had the best ratings in desirable categories such as flower fragrance, long bloom season, and slow growth rate. We find the fragrance of *coco* very similar to that of Juicy Fruit chewing gum. When this plant's in bloom its delightful aroma is inescapable from anywhere in the house. Flowers open in the early evening, close by midnight, and don't reopen until the following evening. Then a few hours later, amazingly, the flower parts—petals and all—are shed and drop to the floor, even though the parts appear to be still firm and in pristine condition! As can be seen from Table 3, the "Juicy Fruit" magnolia



M. virginiana 'Glades' has 2 flowers in bloom on a late November day.

TABLE 1: INDOOR MAGNOLIA QUALITATIVE RATINGS

SPECIES and () years evaluated	Effective Flower Form (5+best)	Flower Frag- rance (5+best)	Bloom Season (5+long)	Growth Rate (5+slow)	Attrac- tive Foliage (5+best)	Insect Prob- lems (5+none)	Mildew/ Fungus Prob- lems (5+none)	OVER- ALL RAT- ING
<i>M. virginiana</i> 'Glades'	(7) 5	4	4	4	3	5	5	30
<i>M. coco</i>	(6) 3	5	5	5	1	4	5	28
<i>M. delavayi</i>	(7) 4	1	1	1	5	5	5	22
<i>M. portoricensis</i> (3)	N/A	N/A	N/A	3	4	2	3	N/A
<i>M. splendens</i>	(4) N/A	N/A	N/A	3	3	2	2	N/A

blooms reliably from May through January—a full 9 months. This is a tremendous asset.

The chief drawback of *M. coco* is its foliage. It tends to be straggly and open, never dense and bushy.

Moreover, as the leaves age, the edges turn brown, beginning at the apex, and this necrotic condition advances progressively down the leaf blade along the margins. It's unsightly, but the plant's appearance can be improved by scissoring the browned parts off each leaf from time to time.

M. coco has no fungal or mildew

TABLE 2: INDOOR PLACEMENT

Species	Location in house	Type/amount of sun exposure
* <i>M. coco</i>	Next to south-facing sliding glass door.	3 hours of direct sunlight.
<i>M. delavayi</i>	Entry foyer which has 4'x4' overhead skylight.	Less than 1 hour of direct sunlight.
<i>M. virg.</i> 'Glades'	East facing sliding glass door.	2 to 3 hours of filtered sunlight.
<i>M. splendens</i> & <i>M. portoricensis</i>	Near east and south-facing windows.	2 to 4 hours of filtered and direct sunlight.

* *M. coco* resides indoors permanently. All others are moved outside during the warm months.

problems in the home environment and only rarely do we see an aphid or two, on newly emerging leaves. It is propagated easily from cuttings. According to Ken Durio of Lousiana Nursery, cuttings taken in June or thereabouts root easily under intermittent mist in a greenhouse. Ken treats his cuttings with Hormodin #3 and uses 100 percent coarse perlite as a growing medium.

M. delavayi. For a large indoor accent plant *M. delavayi* has no equal. Its luxuriant sea-green foliage and sturdy branching form make it very desirable for use in a major setting in the home. *M. delavayi* has large ovate leaves usually about 10 inches long by 6 inches wide. The upper leaf surfaces have a medium gloss and the lower surfaces show a white pubescence. The leaves are so thickly coriaceous that they feel like a kind of plastic or parchment. The sparsely produced flowers are quite large—6 to 8 inches when fully open. The mild fruity fragrance is, at best, mediocre. The blooms, which are poised upright instead of nodding, have 3 light green sepals and usually 6 creamy-white to yellowish petals. Interestingly, *M. delavayi* occasionally produces blooms with petaloid stamens, which can bring the petal total to 15 or more (Ken Durio reports one bloom with 34 petals).

Our *M. delavayi* was purchased from Little Lake Nursery in the fall of 1978. From the beginning the plant grew

TABLE 3: MAGNOLIA COCO FLOWERING
(no. of flowers by month)

Year	J	F	M	A	M	J	J	A	S	O	N	D	Total
1981			1	2			1						5
1982				5		3	2	3	1	3	1		18
1983	1				10	2	3	1	4	3			24
1984	1			1	9	5	4	1	1	1	5		28
1985	3			6	11	1	3	4	3	1			32
Total	5		1	14	30	12	12	9	10	8	6		107

vigorously and each year we repotted it to accommodate its vigor. Now, seven years later, the plant is 6 feet tall (it would have been taller had we not cut it back several times) and resides in half of an old wine barrel—two feet wide at the top and 1½ feet deep. The plant with its container must weigh several hundred pounds. We had to purchase a sturdy hand truck so we could move the plant in and out of the house with the seasons. Nevertheless, it's an absolute beauty and by far outshines the overused fiddle-leaf fig and the rubber plant (*Ficus elastica*) which are cultivated for similar purposes.

The flowers of *M. delavayi* are also quite beautiful, but only for a short time. They open in early evening and are at peak form (i.e. the 3 sepals and 3 outer petals reflex to the horizontal position while the 3 inner petals reflex to approximately 45° of the flower axis) for about one hour. Shortly thereafter the 3 inner petals close back over the gynoecium, giving the flower a *campbellii*-like appearance. Around midnight the 3 outer petals also close back around the gynoecium, leaving only the 3 sepals in the reflexed position. This lasts until the evening of the following day, at which time all 6 petals briefly reflex to the horizontal position before the flower begins to deteriorate later in the evening.

The only thing that keeps *M. delavayi* from being the perfect indoor accent tree is that it doesn't bear enough flowers. We had our first bloom in 1982. Since then we had one flower in 1983, five in 1984, and only

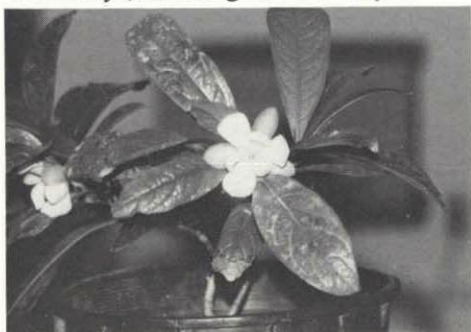
one in 1985. All flowering occurred in August or early September.

Of course, the other disadvantage is *M. delavayi*'s rapid growth, which ultimately can make the plant too big and unwieldy to use in many indoor settings.

Delavay's Magnolia can be propagated from cuttings, using the same method described for *M. coco*. Louisiana Nursery reports that the rooting percentage is good but not quite as successful as for *M. coco*. *Magnolias coco* and *delavayi* are both available from Louisiana Nursery for about \$30.00 each.

Magnolia virginiana 'Glades.' The 'Glades' sweetbay is a selection from the extreme southern limit of native *M. virginiana* in the Florida Everglades. The late Joe McDaniel originally procured this plant (it's not known whether by scion or seed) and had grown it—rootbound—in his famous University of Illinois greenhouse for many years before giving it to me in 1978. I originally tried to grow the plant outside like a normal *M. virginiana* var. *australis* but quickly found out that the plant was extremely tender, and it died even before the full onslaught of its first winter. Fortunately, I had already propagated a second plant so it wasn't lost forever.

'Glades,' like most southern sweetbays, has long narrow elliptic



M. coco is shown with two flowers in 1981. The plant was only 6 inches tall at that time. Note necrotic leaf tips described in text.



Our one-year-old son, David, toddles by the large *M. delavayi*.



M. splendens in the living room. To the far right is a large jade plant.

leaves (5 inches long by $1\frac{1}{4}$ inches wide), medium dark green on the top sides, white glaucous on the under sides. Unlike var. *australis*, 'Glades' has virtually no pubescence. The fragrant flowers are typical for the species—creamy white, 3 inches in diameter, and usually with 11 tepals. Flowers open in the early evening and the petal movements are similar to *M. coco* and *delavayi*, though not quite so drastic (i.e. the petals don't close up quite as tight after the initial opening). Thus, the flower appearance remains pretty good for a full two days.

Probably the most unusual attribute of 'Glades' is that the plant doesn't lose appreciable vigor when it becomes rootbound (even when grafted on *M. acuminata* rootstock). Although it produces just as many new leaves, the

node distances are drastically shortened between petioles. The result is a sort of self-induced bonsai magnolia—one that stays small and densely clothed with leaves. Perhaps this characteristic is born out of a natural ability to survive on the very limited soil availability in the hummocks of south Florida.

Like *M. coco*, *M. virginiana* 'Glades' blooms throughout the year including January and February when the scent of sweetbay is one of the farthest things from one's mind. A curious drawback to the fragrance, however, is that it is much more pleasant outdoors than indoors. Inside this house, at least, *M. coco* is the fragrance winner over *M. virginiana*.

The 'Glades' sweetbay has been propagated by the author from chip



M. portoricensis is shown growing next to a 16-year-old *Trachycarpus fortunei* palm.



Flower of *M. coco* (below) is even smaller than that of sweetbay (shown above).