

# Notes from Vico Morcote

by Sir Peter Smithers

In these notes last year I wrote that my intended trial of the great tree magnolias of the Yulania section "failed lamentably" because so many of them were sent not true to name. In the garden patience is the most essential of all the virtues. This year's notes are an exercise in word-eating.

It is clear that my first large order for magnolias in the winter of 1969-70 was handled by the nursery staff, and that instead of the grafted plants offered in the catalog they sent me a bunch of seedlings. Some were pretty, some worthless and few true to name. But in later years, following correspondence with Mr. Treseder in person, he sent me a number of plants most of which, though not all, were in fact grafts and thus true to name. Hillier's plants with one exception were true to name. These later plantings are now flowering and the following table summarizes the results of my planting of tree magnolias of the Yulania section to date.

In the spring of 1988 *M. campbellii* 'Princess Margaret' FCC displayed its magnificent crimson pink blooms, *M. mollicomata* 'Lanarth' produced the fabulous purple flowers turning with age and strong sun to a delightful lavender but keeping their elegant form, *M. campbellii* 'Sidbury' produced its first flower, a splendid clear bright pink on a strong shapely tree, *M. campbellii* 'Landicla' covered itself with magnificently colored flowers a good deal brighter than the picture in Treseder [*Magnolias*], *M.*

*campbellii* 'Ethel Hillier' covered itself with extremely elegant white cup-and-saucer flowers with the slightest pink flush in the "cup." All have an excellent treelike growth. A 40 foot tree of *M. campbellii* in full bloom from head to foot, even though it be an indifferent variety, is nevertheless a truly magnificent spectacle, but if one is going to wait ten to twenty years for a tree to bloom, it makes no sense to plant anything but the very best. I can state without any hesitation that the trees rated "XXXXX" are amongst the very best varieties of the great tree magnolias. Nevertheless, it was *M. sprengeri* 'Copeland Court' which stole the show in 1988.

## Copeland Court

Sent to me by Mr. Treseder in 1977, it grew into a sturdy symmetrical densely branched tree of broadly columnar habit and, in the summer of 1987, was still putting on very vigorous growth at all points. It had not yet shown a bloom. In the late summer I looked anxiously for a flower bud and finally amongst the dense foliage I sighted one. We would know next spring whether we had the right thing. I forgot about it until the leaves fell, when I went to look again. A first blooming is usually from one to twenty flowers. To my astonishment I calculated over 200 buds, spread broadly across the top of the tree. It would be a great arc of blossom!

When the first bud showed color my plant of *M. sprengeri* 'Diva' was

## Tree Magnolias of the Yulania Section

Name	Year Planted	Year Flowered	Girth	Height	Rating
<i>M. X 'Ann Rosse'</i>	76	85	16"	26'	xxx
( <i>M. X 'Buzzard'</i> ) Not true	76	86	14"	30'	xxx
( <i>M. X 'Caerhays Belle'</i> ) Not true	70	82	cut out		
( <i>M. campbellii</i> 'Caerhays Clone') Not true	71	83	28"	37'	xxxx
( <i>M. campbellii alba</i> 'Caerhays White Clone') Not true	70	82	31"	40'	xxx
<i>M. campbellii alba</i> 'Chyverton'	79	86	16"	21'	xxxxxx
<i>M. campbellii alba</i> seedling	78	85	9"	19'	xxxx
( <i>M. campbellii</i> 'Darjeeling') Not true	70	80	set back		xxx
<i>M. campbellii</i> 'Eric Walther'	79	88	18"	22'	xxx
<i>M. campbellii</i> 'Ethel Hillier'	77	84	24"	26'	xxxxxx
<i>M. campbellii</i> 'Landicla'	74	86	26"	32'	xxxxxx#
<i>M. campbellii</i> 'Princess Margaret' FCC	78	86	18"	30'	xxxxxx
<i>M. campbellii</i> 'Veitch Clone' (Not <i>M. X veitchii</i> )	78	85	blown down		xxx
<i>M. campbellii mollicomata</i> 'Lanarth'	76	88	26"	30'	xxxxxx
<i>M. campbellii mollicomata</i> 'Maharanee'	79	86	14"	20'	xxxx
<i>M. campbellii</i> 'Sidbury'	77	88	22"	30'	xxxxxx
<i>M. dawsoniana</i> Clarke's var.	79	87	13"	20'	xxxx
( <i>M. X 'Hawk'</i> ) Not true	76	84	cut out		
( <i>M. sargentiana robusta</i> dark form) Not true	70	83	23"	22'	xxxxx#
<i>M. sargentiana robusta</i> Chyverton dark form	76	86	20"	24'	xxxx
( <i>M. sprengeri</i> 'Claret Cup') Not true	70	79	25"	26'	xxx
<i>M. sprengeri</i> 'Copeland Court'	77	88	26"	30'	xxxxxx
<i>M. sprengeri</i> var. <i>diva</i> 'Diva'	76	85	10"	18'	xxxxxx#

Note: All girth measurements are taken at 3' above ground level

Heights are my best estimate short of trigonometry

xxxxxx = a magnolia of the very highest quality

xxxx = a magnolia worth planting

xxx = a magnolia which I would not plant but which, being an established flowering tree, is worth keeping

"cut out" = cut down because not worth garden space

# = growth arrested due to accident or disease

The following tree magnolias of the Yulania section are also in the collection but have not yet flowered: *M. campbellii* and its hybrids - 'Borde Hill', 'Betty Jessel', 'Charles Raffill', 'Darjeeling', 'Early Rose', 'Mark Jury', 'Queen Caroline', 'Treve Holman', and 'Wakehurst'.

*M. dawsoniana* 'Chyverton'

*M. sargentiana robusta* and its hybrids - 'Blood Moon', Chyverton pale form, 'Michael Rosse'.

*M. sprengeri* and its hybrids - 'Eric Savill' and 'Thomas Messel'



already in bloom. The color of 'Copeland Court' sent me scurrying for the books. It was unmistakably brighter than 'Diva'. But was my 'Diva' a true 'Diva'? It had not grown particularly well, having been set back for some unknown reason early in its life. A careful comparison with both the Treseder texts convinced me that without doubt I had the right thing. Turning to the descriptions of 'Copeland Court' (Treseder, *Magnolias*, p. 109) I found the amusing account of how the unflowered plant was saved from destruction when Copeland Court became part of the Truro Cathedral Choir School, and how after many adventures it finally flowered. "The flowers...are much richer in colour than those of the Caerhays parent ['Diva'], being of a deep clear pink, shaded crimson, but it would be necessary to grow a grafted tree of 'Diva' beside it to make an accurate comparison... Suffice it to say that, when viewed at the end of a day spent visiting such renowned Magnolia collections as Caerhays, Trewithen and Trengwainton..., the vivid colour of this solitary Magnolia created a lasting impression..." Thus Mr. Neil Treseder.

Well, I had indeed a grafted plant of 'Diva' growing within twenty yards of 'Copeland Court' so if I had the right thing it would be possible to make the direct comparison which Treseder proposed. When the great arc of flowers opened the impression was indeed staggering! Remembering that Nigel Holman's Cornish temperament brought a tear to his eye when he first beheld the open flower of 'Treve Holman', I am perhaps allowed to admit to being deeply moved, although not a Cornishman, by the spectacle before me.

'Copeland Court' was exactly as described by Treseder, clearly deeper and brighter in color even than 'Diva', and the growth, allowing for the happy uninterrupted life of my

tree since it was planted, corresponded with his "erect tree", very different from the "outer branches widely spreading and horizontal or pendulous" which he gives as the habit of 'Diva', and which my 'Diva' displays.

Now in this garden we can look down upon many of our magnolias from above, and, particularly in this perspective, there is an immediate and obvious difference between the two plants. The tepals of 'Diva' are described as "rose carmine outside and white flushed or streaked with pale rose or carmine within", and this corresponds exactly with my plant of 'Diva'. Seen from above or from eye-level, the impression is of a pink and white display, while from beneath the tree the display is pink. It was at once clear that the impression created by 'Copeland Court' is that of a self pink flower, from whatever angle it is seen. On close examination the inside of the tepals is found to be in fact a solid pink though slightly less bright than the exterior of the flower. Both magnolias are a magnificent spectacle of beauty, but if I had to be content with one or the other, there could be no hesitation in the choice both for color and habit: 'Copeland Court'. This is, then, the place to remember with gratitude Major Mischler, the headmaster of Truro Cathedral Choir School, whose care and forethought preserved the original tree of this beautiful magnolia from destruction.

### 'Star Wars' Revisited.

Where does the analysis in the above table leave the new "instant blooming" magnolias which have *campbellii* or *sargentiana robusta* blood? 'Iolanthe' is comparable with the stars of the table for flower size, display and habit, but not for color. It is beautiful but pale by comparison, approximating to *M. campbellii* 'Eric Walther'. 'Serene' is an altogether more modest plant, a

splendid thing for a small garden. But the flower of 'Star Wars' is definitely in the same league as 'Princess Margaret', 'Sibbury' and 'Landicla'. It is not quite as fine a color as any of the three, nor so elegant a shape, but it need not be ashamed in their company. I read with interest Os Blumhart's description in *MAGNOLIA* of the rolled petals of his 'Star Wars', giving a spiky effect to the flower. Amongst two to three hundred blooms carried this year, my plant produced no spikes and rolled no petals. The picture in *MAGNOLIA* remains typical. I can only presume that some peculiarity of Os's local conditions has produced the effect he speaks of. With a full display of bloom this year, 'Star Wars' produced yet another winning characteristic. It has inherited from *M. liliiflora* the tendency to prolong blooming. In fact the display lasted for a full month, during which there were always enough blooms open to be effective.

Of course my "trial" of the great tree magnolias is not really a true trial. I have one plant of each, and they are growing in different situations in the garden. Many probable star performers are still to flower. The foregoing therefore represents one man's experience with such of these noble plants as have already flowered for him. Perhaps I should also make a confession at this point. Now that the *campbellii* and *sprengeri* trees are coming into their own, I must admit that the beautiful Greshams and Pickards, so long my loves, are outshone! In a year such as this, when everything seems to be blooming at once, they hardly get a glance. But then, they have given me much joy during the long wait, and in a normal year they will prolong the season when *M. campbellii* is over. Also, there is one amongst them which has a color not reproduced even by any of the tree magnolias in this garden, and which

catches the eye even though it is in flower beside *M. campbellii* 'Landicla': it is *M. × soulangiana* 'Burgundy'. The luminous self bluish-pink of this mysterious flower, without any hint of the purplish-reds of most soulangianas, defies description and is unique in magnolia so far as I know.

### 'Snow Queen'

Mr. Pickard, the raiser of this magnolia, thought it one of his finest 'Picture' seedlings. It reached me several years later than all the others, flowered for the first time last year with a couple of blooms, and this year carried a modest display. It has a very vigorous upright growth, strongly apical-dominant, which no doubt indicates that its habit will be that of the taller 'Picture' seedlings such as 'Opal' or the Japanese 'White Giant'. It is a pure white magnolia without any trace of purple or pink in the flower. Personally I have a preference for self colors in magnolia flowers, and I am not in general attracted to the numerous white flowers which are flushed with purple. This was, therefore, a welcome addition to the collection, but would its retention be warranted in addition to 'Tina Durio'? The flower struck me as of great elegance with a quality hard to define. I understand what Gresham meant when he named his white hybrids "buxom blondes". Somehow, this flower seemed different. It had a severe beauty in contrast to its voluptuous rivals such as 'Sayonara'. I walked back and forth between the two trees, and still the difference escaped me. Finally, I picked a flower of 'Snow Queen' to carry to the other lady for comparison. As soon as I had it in my hand the mystery was solved! The massive white goblet had six broad tepals, as against the "nine or more" cited by Treseder as characteristic of the Yulania section.



*Magnolia campbellii* and its varieties which tend to produce a cup-and-saucer flower have a very pronounced form which is all their own. Most of the 'Picture' and Gresham hybrids with nine tepals or occasionally eight, give the impression of rather complex flower. The six great broad tepals of 'Snow Queen', with lightly reflexed margins, create a quite different impression of simplicity yet splendor: It is a dazzling white "goblet" both externally and internally. It is too early to pronounce finally upon the habit of this plant, but it seems extremely promising, and I suspect that in a couple of years it will stand alongside the red-purple 'Ruby' and the magnificent pink 'Sundew' as the best of the Pickard 'Picture' seedlings.

#### *M. × wieseneri*

Finally, My Dear Wiesener, we have a clue to the mystery, though it is not yet solved. It may be recalled that some years ago my plant of *M. × wieseneri* astonished me by producing a seed capsule. This year the first of my young plants, Seedling C, showed a bud, high up amongst foliage intermediate between that of *M. hypoleuca* and *M. × wieseneri*. The leaves were 12 × 7", far larger than *M. × wieseneri* foliage, glaucous beneath. Day by day I watched the development of the bud on the tree now 16' tall. (*M. × wieseneri* flowers happily at 2'.) It was on 8th May that it opened, far beyond my reach. The great question was, did it have the miraculous fragrance of *M. × wieseneri* or would it have the rather dubious odor of *M. hypoleuca*? The flower seemed considerably larger than *M. × wieseneri* and more of an oblong shape. I determined to cut and photograph it in the interest of horticulture. Teetering on top of the stepladder I nosed the half-open

bloom. It did! It did! It had the magnificent powerful scent of *M. × wieseneri*! I carried the cut bloom and foliage to the flowering tree of *M. × wieseneri* and tested the fragrance side-by-side. I could tell no difference.

All this of course throws no light upon the origins of *M. × wieseneri*. It still may be a natural hybrid between *M. hypoleuca* and *M. sieboldii*, selfed in what was an exceptionally favorable year for seed setting. Or it may be the same thing pollinated by the nearby *M. hypoleuca* or it may be a species which has become infertile and is extinct in the wild for that reason.

The foliage on my other as yet unflowered seedlings of *M. × wieseneri* varies from one which is close to the seed parent to another which is almost identical with *M. hypoleuca*. It will be exciting to see what happens when they bloom which should be next year.

What then is the importance of this plant, if any? It is too soon to estimate its garden merit. It has a much better growth than *M. × wieseneri*, but it is also clearly a very robust grower and will need space. Perhaps its greatest interest will be for hybridists: it may transmit the splendid fragrance of *M. × wieseneri*. Mr. Eisenhut will graft it next winter so that if an accident should occur the genes are preserved.



*M. × wieseneri*