M. sinensis: the pretty little bush

by Harold Hopkins

We magnolia dilettantes – I recklessly assume there are more than one of us – now and then go where the trees are and, perforce, learn and unlearn small things.

Thus have I found myself with yen for a little Chinese number in Section Oyama that has never got much of an ogle on these pages. *Magnolia sinensis*, or more properly *M. sieboldii* var. *sinensis,* remains somewhat overshadowed and largely unplanted as the showier houris of Himalaya lure us down the garden path with hot-eyed promises they can't always keep.

Which is not to say *Magnolia sinensis* is a plain Jane, merely that its springtime finery will never resemble Las Vegas at midnight, nor even stop traffic in residential neighborhoods. You have to get within a hundred yards or closer to spot its flowers, which coyly bow and avert their gaze from you as often as they directly face you, so modest and unassuming are they. Like the American magnolias, *M. sinensis* waits until May or June to bedeck its branches, and when its floral treasures start to peek from the foliage they are shyer, smaller and fewer than the pink and purple clouds of Jezebelian splendor that emanate from the colorful Asiatic early bloomers.

Still and all, to the constant admirer, the flower of *M. sinensis* has its charms. Situated here and there amid the sea green foliage of this agreeable multi-stemmed bush with its largish obtusely oval leaves are marble-sized, creamy white, almost globular buds, gently inclined or pendent, never erect, and opening at random instead of in one overweening flush. When one unfolds, it displays in the center a vivid green gynoecium, ringed by tidy rows of short stamens that are deep pink, in turn surrounded by nine or ten and sometimes twelve waxy, spatulate tepals, imbued with a most attractive scent. The whole affair is hardly ever bigger than three inches across, but as we all know the size a frog is depends on the size of its puddle, and *M. sinensis* is described in Neil Treseder's book, *Magnolias,* as being the largest flowered magnolia in Section Oyama.

That section includes the type form of *M. sieboldii,* which also is the type species for Oyama; *M. globosa,* whose two forms, from China and India, are both cultivated in some locations in the more benign climates of Great Britain and a few U.S. locales, though in neither country is it a household word; and *M. wilsonii,* which seems to survive in many parts of the United States about as well as the Mandan Indian survived smallpox.

So it is not without some wrong turns and trepidations that I seek out *M. sinensis* along the garden path.

As for *M. wilsonii,* for some years after about 1967 I grew a number of

plants every spring from seed furnished by the Royal Horticultural Society off plants at Wisley, in southern England, where it grows quite well. But none of the seedlings I raised ever made it into their second year. *M. wilsonii,* I suspect, would much rather have been dancing, back at Wisley. I've heard similar accounts from others of its failure to thrive here. If there's anyone in the U.S. who has had better luck with it, I've yet to hear his or her tale of grow.

Magnolia wilsonii does adapt quite well to the insular climate of much of Great Britain, according to Brian Savage, who keeps informed about magnolia cultivation in the United Kingdom, and who notes that *M. wilsonii* has a reputation for strewing replicas of itself under the tree and in neighbors' yards.

The history of *M. sieboldii* in the U.S. is a little better than for *M. globosa* and *wilsonii,* but *sieboldii* still seems picky, mainly wanting a cool summer and a situation that's not too sunny, windy, or dry.

Magnolia sieboldii, which seems to tolerate many cooler parts of the United States if sheltered from full sun and excessive summer heat, is plentiful in the montane regions of Japan and is readily available from there, and even from South Korea – resulting from plant exploration trips by botanists from the National and Arnold Arboretums and the generosity of Ferris Miller of Chollipo Arboretum in South Korea. More people have been trying it in the past few years, and for many it's successful.

But it seems to me that the *M. sinensis* form would be even better for *Magnolia* fanciers in many parts of the country, because it does not seem to be so delicate. Not only does it appear to be hardier than heretofore thought, but it also may better tolerate some of the dry, dusty, sunny, even windy situations. At least this seems true from my brief knowledge and experience.

This issue of MAGNOLIA, or one soon after it, is reasonably likely to have some melancholy accounts about magnolias lost to the drought conditions that have prevailed so far this year (mid-July 1988) over large areas of the country. I have just had a midsummer look at a *M. sinensis* grown by Tom Stone, MD, a member of our Society who has established an eclection of many types of woody plants on the 17 acres where he lives on Braddock Heights, a kind of foothill of the Catoctin Mountains that start to arise west of Frederick, Maryland.

Braddock Heights is named for Edward Braddock, the British general who stopped there in 1755 during the French and Indian War, prior to marching on to Fort Duquesne, Pennsylvania, where he was killed and his army badly defeated by a much smaller force of French and Indians who insisted on picking off Braddock and his soldiers from cover instead of squaring off in the open with their red-coated opponents. As we've all been told on grandpa's knee, the British forces would have been wiped out if they hadn't been rallied by a young colonel named George Washington, who had joined them the day before. The American gave them some quick bird-in-hand lessons on prudent use of the lay of the land and the bushes and trees thereon.

Tom's *M. sinensis* flowered well this year, has several swelling seed pods on it, and looks good after a long dry spell in an open situation. Close to it is a

Above: M. sinensis *flower*

Below: M. sinensis *foliage*

M. virginiana, which also has done well in the spot. Tom got his *M. sinensis* eight years ago from Gossler Farms Nursery, in Oregon.

Roger Gossler says that *M. sinensis* flowers from Mother's Day to Independence Day at the nursery in Springfield, Oregon, making it one of the longest-flowering woody ornamentals in the Northwest, though the flowering time of *M. sieboldii* lasts somewhat longer into the summer, and therefore it's a better seller than *M. sinensis.* The *M. sinensis* blooming period in Oregon corresponds closely with that in Maryland.

Roger says the flowers of *M. sinensis* seem whiter than *M. sieboldii's* more ivory color. The late flowering is desirable, as Roger notes, because the May to July blooms miss all frost. As in Maryland, *M. sinensis* seems cold-hardy, and suffered no barksplit nor dieback from the temperatures of 12 degrees below zero F there in the early cold spell of 1972. Roger suggests planting in semi-shade or, if in full sun, putting lower shrubs around the tree to protect the bark from sunburn. The bark seems very thin like the native *Cornus nuttallii* there, which grows among other shrubs in hedgerows, he said.

Although *M. sinensis* sets seed in Frederick, Maryland, it doesn't at Gossler's, but it does root easily from cuttings and, astonishingly, starts flowering immediately, Roger says. The failure to set seed probably is due to the cooler summers in the Northwest. Of course, precocious flowering on sexually mature wood is a phenomenon shared by *M. grandiflora* and some others, and a few, including *M. macrophylla* var. *ashei* and *M. virginiana*, can flower as seedlings in less than two years under optimum growing conditions. The late – spring to summer – flowering of these magnolias may have something to do with this, since their flowering and growing times are not in tandem as with some Asiatics.

I once grew *M. sinensis* to pretty good size without being sure of its identity, a consequence, I suppose, of reading pages instead of leaves. I had begun a correspondence with the late Geoffrey Gorer, an anthropologist and accomplished amateur gardener and botanist who lived in Sussex, England, because of our mutual interest in the genus *Illicium,* a distant *magnolia* relative. Geoffrey had several magnolias in his garden, including *M. sinensis*, and I talked him into joining the Society as an act of fealty to them. Each autumn for a few years until his health failed he carefully collected the entire crop of seed from his *M. sinensis* bush and mailed them to me to be passed on to the Society's Seed Counter.

One time, while I was living in Frederick, Maryland, I planted a few of these seed and got a plant, and it survived over the winter, which it was practically guaranteed not to do, according to all the best information about it that I had read. I lined it out among several rows of different magnolias. The longer I looked at it the more dubious I became, particularly because it developed enormous juvenile leaves. I thought at first it was *M. macrophylla,* whose juvenile leaf shapes are sometimes indeterminate, then later I decided I had mislabeled it and that it was probably *M. acuminata*, again because I knew that *M. acuminata* leaves are sometimes huge. At last I had to acknowledge that I had a stranger on my hands, and decided it

must be *M. sinensis,* the way I tagged it in the first place. At this point it was three or four years old.

Soon after that I sold the farm, and now it is no longer there, and I haven't asked the new owner what happened to it. As seasoned leavetakers say, it's better not to look back at lost loves.

Magnolia sinensis was first collected in 1908 in western Szechwan, China, by Ernest Wilson on a plant-hunting expedition sponsored by Arnold Arboretum, of which he was later director. In *Magnolias,* Neil Treseder states that *M. sinensis* was probably among the collection of Asian magnolia seed or plants sent by Prof. Charles Sargent, then Arnold Arboretum director, to a French nurseryman for propagation and distribution to guard against their loss. My own feeling is that *M. sinensis* would likely have done very well in at least some parts of Massachusetts, and might now be a more familiar tree to us if Prof. Sargent hadn't shown so much wisdom. So much for 80-years-later quarterbacking. All's well that ends that way.

According to Treseder, *M. sinensis* is a naturally spreading large shrub with multiple stems, but it can be trained as a small tree of up to 20 feet by leaving one dominant stem and removing the others. Tom Stone's plant, if he doesn't cut back some of its several stems, is going to be even less arboreal than *M. liliiflora,* from what my eyes tell me.

I wonder if it wouldn't be a fun tree for breeding! Phil Savage in his White Period made intergeneric crosses between one Oyama Section species, *M. sieboldii,* I think, and one or more species in the closely related genus *Michelia. Sieboldii* has crossed with some other magnolias, by hap or design. Now comes *M. sinensis,* with its flowers larger than *M. sieboldii,* unsullied and ripe for the pollinator's palate, and no stepladder needed to risk a busted rib reaching for that high one.

Geoffrey Gorer once complained about the amorphous or helter-skelter growth pattern and, to him, unpleasing flower scent of one of his magnolias involving Oyama, the hybrid between *M. hypoleuca* and *M. sieboldii* known as *M.* x *watsonii,* now *M.* x *wieseneri.* If somebody could stir the pot again, substituting *M. sinensis* for *M. sieboldii,* perhaps a new hybrid could be produced that would be tidier, have just as pretty a flower, and one that wouldn't so assail a finicky nose. Might even obviate the problem of whether to call the result *watsonii* or *wieseneri.* I suspect Geoffrey would like this stir, mostly mental so far, about his little bush. ▪