

Fatal Error

by PETER SMITHERS

Computer addicts such as myself will be well aware of the perturbation amounting to panic which follows the appearance of the words "Fatal Error" on the computer screen. I can no longer disguise from myself the fact that I have begun to receive a similar message from some of my magnolias.

For the first fifty-two years of my gardening life — no mean span — I grew my plants in the deep alluvium of a valley bottom. First, the valley of the Itchen, in Hampshire, one of the two streams revered by dry-fly fishermen throughout the world. Maybe the river Test produces heavier fish, but to take trout in the Itchen is probably the greater art. Then for another five years I gardened in the valley of the Rhine at Strasbourg, a stream revered worldwide by wine drinkers and romantics of all nationalities. I have been a gardener since Nanny taught me at the age of four, a dry-fly fisherman since father taught me at the age of ten, a wine-drinker since I taught myself at Oxford at the age of seventeen, and according to ladies who should know, an incurable romantic since birth. So it was that in my gardening I never made the connection between the great rivers and my methods of cultivation. The river stood for other things. I knew

and took trouble about the top foot or eighteen inches of rich valley earth — not what sacrilegious Americans call "dirt" — but gave no thought to what lay beneath. Doubtless it went on and on below until one reached chalk or gravel or rock or something else far removed from the realities of cultivation.

When we selected the site for the house and garden from which I write, it seemed to offer ideal conditions for growing the plants which I liked best. Magnolias, lilies, tree peonies and many other delights. Plenty of rain, plenty of sun, a horticulturally valuable nip of frost in winter but no late ones. As for the soil, it was light, very slightly acid, quick draining and quite fertile. What more, I thought, could I ask for? Alas! It did not occur to me to find out just how much of that excellent soil there might be. The answer now given to me by some of my big Magnolias, twenty years too late, is "not enough."

We are upon a steep slope and the land was terraced by the Ticinese centuries ago for growing vines: the Merlot grape producing a sometimes ferocious red blood of the soil, not good enough to challenge the market. The vines had been abandoned some year ago. Vines, like so many plants, rather enjoy a

stony soil, but unlike others, they do not need a great deal of it. The terraces, so laboriously made by manual labor, had been furnished with enough soil to make the vines happy, and no more. Beneath lay the rock: micaceous schist: just the thing for a rock garden!

When construction began the first task was to make a flat space to permit the building of the house. Bulldozers made short work of this, and threw out great quantities of earth and rock creating some new and broader terraces at the top of the site, where there would henceforth be deep soil. Below them the old vine terraces remained untouched. Magnolia planting began.

Twenty years from planting those Magnolias which grow in the deep soil of the new terraces in the upper part of the garden are still growing with magnificent abandon. 'Royal Crown' or *campbellii* 'Lanarth' are forest trees with trunks 32 inches in diameter at the statutory height. They are literally "a picture of health." Their vitality is that of an athlete in form. They look as though they will continue rapid growth for years to come.

At the bottom of the garden it is another story. For fifteen years there was no noticeable difference between the growth of these trees and those at the top. But during the last five years, which have been conspicuously short of rain, they have begun to look thin and to grow poorly. With little soil they have outgrown the possibilities of the site and are unlikely to make more progress. Indeed in dry weather if watered

they are prone to attack by the fatal *Armillaria mellea*, a fungus so welcome in the kitchen but so dreaded in the garden. They are, in fact, beginning to "go back."

I have made the point and I need not further inflict my mortification upon fellow members of the Magnolia Society. It will be of some satisfaction if these words cause any future planters of Magnolias to look at the healthy three-foot plants which they are about to set in place and to ask themselves whether when they reach forty or fifty foot they will have enough earth to keep them growing.

Prolonged drought last year and this has been a problem here as in much of Italy where there is a grave crisis in agriculture. Nevertheless those Magnolias which have adequate depth of soil seem to be relatively little affected. It is, however, a source of great anxiety to any garden owner. The municipal water supply, in this case reconditioned lake water, is unpleasant to drink and certainly not much appreciated by plants: so different from the delicious spring water which flowed from the tap here twenty years ago. Watering is not an answer even if water continues to be available.

What should I do about the lower terraces which the Magnolias do not much like? The sensible answer is to cut down the trees and plant things which are happy in a small root-run. To have lived and gardened so long and still to have to learn by making mistakes! But that, as the late Khrushchev used to say "is life itself." ■