

# The Lordly Talauma

by WILLIAM T. DRYSDALE

Of the forty or so talaumas, most are native to Caribbean islands, Mexico, or Brazil with the conspicuous exception of *Talauma hodgsonii*. However, the latter is the only one cultivated in the United States and in Europe (under glass). This is probably due to the English who held India as a possession for 300 years. The live trees first taken to England were protected by Wardian cases on deck of a ship.

The generic name derives from that used by Amerindians who held the very fragrant *T. mexicana* in high esteem, cultivating it in their gardens and reserving the flowers exclusively for royalty. The genus was created by A. Laurent de Jussieu in *Flora of British India*. The specific name honors the orientalist Brian H. Hodgson, LL.D., F.R.S., one time Minister at the Court of Nepal who played host to Hooker at Darjeeling for many months.

*Talauma hodgsonii* was discovered by Thomas Hooker *filis* in 1848 in the valleys of Sikkim where, at 5000 to 6000 feet, it formed forests. Its botanical description was given by him and his colleague, Dr. Thomson, in the *Annals of the Botanic Garden at Calcutta*. An informative account by him is to be found in *Curtis Botanical Magazine* for January 1, 1895.

*Talauma hodgsonii* is an aristocrat of the vegetable kingdom with its great light tan bole of a trunk soaring straight up to around 65 feet. Its principal glory is its great oversized leaves. As a bonus it carries white magnolia-like blossoms having a strong fragrance. Hooker, in his 78th year, wrote that it "is one of the noblest of the flowering trees of the Himalaya," and on another occasion that it is the second most beautiful flowering tree in the world (presumably *Magnolia campbellii* ranked first). These are two very different trees. *Magnolia campbellii* is glorious in flower but possesses undistinguished foliage. The reverse is true of *Talauma hodgsonii*.

That this magnificently imposing tree should be so rare — I know of less than 25 in California — is nothing less than a tragedy since it can be grown in most of southern California and up the coast as far as San Francisco. It is of the easiest culture and can take temperatures of 25°F.

The tree is rare because viability of seeds is lost quickly due to the deterioration of the albumen. Further, at present *T. hodgsonii* is on the Cites list, and therefore commercial trade in seed is prohibited. Although my tree has produced cones, the seeds are not viable, and I know of no seedlings of

trees growing locally.

All the trees I have been able to locate originated at the legendary horticultural establishment of Hugh Evans — Evans and Reeves Nursery in the Brentwood section of West Los Angeles, California. This nursery was celebrated for its introduction of new plants to California from the 1930s to the 1950s.

Mr. Morgan (Bill) Evans made several importations of seeds from the Forestry Department, Dehra Dun, India. Only one importation had seed still viable and possibly 200 plants were produced. These were introduced in 1952. Because it was such a noted nursery, it had clients from San Francisco to San Diego, but, naturally, most customers were local. Many of the trees were planted in the Westwood Village section, then an area of single family homes and one or two story commercial buildings. Unfortunately this area literally exploded into monstrous 30 story office buildings and 20 story condominiums. In this transformation the landscaping, which included many talaumas, was destroyed.

Surviving specimens are to be found as far north as the Blake Garden, Kensington (Berkeley), now belonging to the University of California; the Strybing Arboretum, San Francisco (three specimens); and Lotusland, now a public estate in Montecito near Santa Barbara. A number survive in Santa Monica. Four are to be found in the little canyon which served as a compound for several members of the Evans family. One can be seen from the street at 1528 Yale Street and another in the courtyard of an

apartment complex. At the University of California at Los Angeles one is to be found north of Royce Hall and another in the Botanic Garden. South Coast Botanic Garden on Palos Verdes Peninsula has one. The Huntington Library in San Marino (Pasadena) has two. The largest is adjacent to the Art Gallery. In Riverside there is my tree plus a plant rooted from it at the Botanic Garden of the University of California at Riverside. The San Diego Zoo has a specimen.

Except for mine and those at the Huntington, all are growing under coastal conditions — cool and humid. One would think such salubrious conditions would be ideal, and for the foliage likely they are; but flowering is poor. The tree in the Blake Gardens flowered in 1967. The tree at the Strybing Arboretum also flowered in 1967 but very rarely in the years since. Probably this is due to insufficient heat to properly ripen the wood. Of course most of these are grown in botanic gardens which usually close at five o'clock. This likely also accounts for there being no mention in the literature of *T. hodgsonii* being a night bloomer.

The purpose of this article is to inform people that this superb tree flourishes in the rather severe climate of the inland valleys of southern California. The foliage on my tree is magnificent and flowers are produced generously every year. I cannot say produced copiously because flowering occurs at terminals and there are only so many of them. Branchlets are quite sturdy because each supports a heavy load of leaves.

A brief description of our



*Above and below: The nocturnal blooms of Talauma hodgsonii.*



mediterranean climate may be in order. Located 60 miles inland and with a low range of mountains between us and the ocean, we receive very little moderating influence of a marine nature and, therefore, are subject to greater extremes of heat and cold. Pasadena, only 30 miles inland, does enjoy some moderating conditions.

Riverside is citrus country and without irrigation is semi-desert. Humidity is usually low even after a rain. Frequently the humidity is in the low teens or even lower when north winds blow in from the desert. These winds are strong and on occasion very destructive, yet *T. hodgsonii* has never suffered any structural damage, and surprisingly few leaves have been whipped off. Nevertheless one should try to place such a tree with as much wind protection as feasible. Normal rainfall is seven inches, but less is common. Often we have one or two hot spells with temperatures above 100°F for ten days or two weeks at a stretch, sometimes peaking at 115°F. In winter we are often frost free, but then there are the exceptions such as the winter of 1990-1991 when temperatures in my garden approached 20°F. With the exception of temperatures below 25°F, *T.*

*hodgsonii* can take all these conditions with equanimity. At 25°F there may be some rasp-like burning of parts of some leaves, but it does not cause the leaf to drop. Below this more serious burning occurs, and there may be some leaf drop. At 20°F there will be close to 95% defoliation.

Unfortunately, of the trees that I have seen, the canopy is quite high. Whether this is due to trimming or

whether the lower branches were shaded out is hard to tell, but the tree should be encouraged to produce low branches the better to admire the singularly handsome leaves and their striking venation.

My tree has been given generous cultural treatment and the dimensions of the leaves given here are larger than that in the literature. The very largest leaves are slightly over two feet long and are nine inches wide at their broadest. They are impressively clustered in groups of 15 to 20 at the tips of long branches. Two or three leaves closest to the terminal are smaller and may be a foot or less in length. Interior branching is weak and becomes shaded out. Each leaf has from 20-25 pairs of reticulated veins which are conspicuous because of their prominence and because of their light, creamy-green color. They create a slightly quilted effect to the leaf surface. The edges are slightly waved. They usually hold for two years and leaf drop is concentrated over a few weeks in late spring. This occurs as new leaves are developing, usually in dramatic flushes of growth. The newly developing leaves are a uniform translucent maroon-pink that light up the tree for several weeks depending on the climate. They are spectacular and especially striking when the sun is behind them. The cooler the climate the longer the color remains. It is therefore longer lasting under coastal conditions where three, four, or even five flushes may occur depending on one's generosity with water. Under inland conditions this flush is generally a single occurrence in late spring and infrequently

occurs at other times. On one occasion a secondary flush occurred when a nearby clump of bamboo was removed. This happened under summertime conditions and the maroon quickly turned to green. The freshly developed leaf, now green, has a somewhat glaucous cast to it, though perhaps it is technically improper to use that term. Nevertheless, it has a slightly bluish cast to it. The texture is firm and becomes glabrous.

Fortunately, the leaf drop is rather concentrated. The dried leaves are very brittle and may be hand picked and crushed with a gloved hand or raked and stomped to small pieces. This is done here because local soils are deficient in humus content.

When first *Talauma hodgsonii* began to flower, I could not find blossoms in prime condition no matter how early in the morning they were examined. I began checking them at night. One can tell in late afternoon which buds will open because the sepals, a drab purplish-red edged green, hang parallel with the stem, exposing their white interiors. The flowers open here in June, in a matter of ten or fifteen minutes, between 8 and 8:30, which is shortly after dusk. On my tree petals are immaculately white. Hooker reports that some are faintly rose at the tips. Flowers remain in prime condition only a few hours. At sunrise they are already off-color and by 10 o'clock have begun to discolor. Around noon they are brown. The sepals and petals fall before morning. Cones usually drop within two or three days, but occasionally they may hold for over

a week.

Hooker and others describe the fragrance as spicy, but to me it definitely is not. *Magnolia grandiflora* is spicy, but the fragrance of *T. hodgsonii* is more closely allied to that of *Magnolia x soulangiana*, which to me is not at all spicy. Very likely trees differ as does the individual's perception of fragrance.

Although its flower, six inches wide by four deep, is attractive I do not think of *Talauma hodgsonii* as a flowering tree. In no way is it spectacular in bloom. Its solitary terminal flowers are largely lost in the foliage, and one is often made aware of the flower not by sight but by its tell-tale fragrance. The flowers may be regarded as a bonus on a tree that is notable because of its splendid leaves. Flowers are never numerous enough to create an exciting prospect as with many other species in the genus. It is not even comparable to the solitary blossoms of *Magnolia grandiflora*, whose blossoms are carried in a more exposed manner as if on a dais. The flowers are attractive in a quiet way for a very short period. The fragrance is more important than the blossom.

The wood of *T. hodgsonii* is of poor quality being of very light weight. Its scarcity in nature may be due to its use as firewood, and natural reproduction may be difficult as it is in *Michelia doltsopa*.

Vegetative propagation of this tree is possible. Several successful propagations have been achieved at the Botanic Garden at UCR by use of intermittent mist and bottom heat. A friend is also attempting air layering which likely will prove

successful. We have thought of grafting on to *Magnolia grandiflora*, but it is difficult to match the two because the branches of *T. hodgsonii* are quite substantial in size. Inarching onto *M. grandiflora* has been accomplished in England.

As for all trees, a deep soil is desirable for the cultivation of *Talauma hodgsonii*, and in dry areas it enjoys frequent irrigation. It does not appear to have any special demands and, so far as I am aware, has been completely free of insect pests and scale. I am not an organic gardener, but I apply frequent mulches. To enhance leaf quality I use generous amounts of hoof and horn.

Recently *Talauma* has been determined to be *Magnolia*; and this again depends upon whether one is, botanically, a lumper or a divider. *Talauma*, and for that matter *Michelia* also, have been acknowledged as very close to those members of the family we have always recognized as *Magnolia*. What has principally separated *Talauma* from *Magnolia* is that the seed cones of magnolias are hard and retain their form even when disintegration commences after laying on damp ground. *Talauma*, on the other hand, possess seed cones which collapse upon the ripening of the seed, often while still on the tree or almost immediately upon falling to the ground. The carpels, containing one or two red seeds, break away from the central core or column leaving it deeply pitted where once they were attached. The cone crumbles in a single second leaving a jumble of imbricated,

woody carpels, the central column and peduncle.

This matter of division may be a bit arbitrary, but then is not the basis for the separation of *Michelia* not equally arbitrary? Here the basis is principally due to the fact *Magnolia* flowering is on terminal wood, while that of *Michelia* is terminal but also axillary.

The name *talauma* logically groups together those members of the family which are quite tender and have cultural similarities, being chiefly from the Caribbean area and southeast Asia. It is obvious I prefer the old designation. 🌿

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