

Laura Dwight's Magnolias

Judith Leet*

Laura Dwight's idea was to make Boston's Back Bay, Particularly Commonwealth Avenue, look as beautiful in spring as Washington's Tidal Basin—a great public welcome to the new season. She foresaw the effect of having the whole avenue bloom at once with a row of the most floriferous of trees, the saucer magnolia—its showy flowers a rich pink at the base and a creamy white at the petal tips. And the trees were to be democratically planted in the front yard of everyone's nineteenth century Victorian brownstone.

In the 1960s, Miss Dwight, a resident of the Back Bay who was then in her sixties, conceived of such a scheme for beautifying Commonwealth Avenue and had the energy and persuasiveness to carry it out. One contemporary who knows Dwight in gardening and horticultural circles describes her as a very appealing person: "It was like being pushed by a fairy or an elf; you couldn't say no to her. I'm sure that's why there are so many magnolias on Commonwealth Avenue." A younger friend remembers her as "forceful, even pushy—but pushy in the right direction."

From her apartment on Commonwealth Avenue, Laura Dwight observed the once-elegant Back Bay section of Boston deteriorating all around her, and who became aroused, even irate at the apathy and detachment of local residents. Hoping to help reverse this downward trend, she devoted her considerable energies to neighborhood-improvement projects and became an early member and later an officer of the Neighborhood Association of the Back Bay (NABB), a group working to restore stability to the area.

With the hearty approval of the NABB, Laura Dwight

*Excerpted from *Arnoldia* Vol. 48(4), Fall 1988, pp. 17-25, with permission. *Arnoldia* gives a fuller account of Laura Dwight's life and the history of the Back Bay area of Boston.

carried out her first large-scale street-planting project in the fall of 1963. She personally rang doorbells and convinced owners—some of them friends, others total strangers—that it was a good idea to plant one or several magnolia trees in their front yards and to participate in the collective street-long display. She offered to provide free labor to plant the trees on a designated weekend, the material to enrich the soil, and a young tree, which would be delivered to the door. The resident only had to agree to the idea in principle and to pay a nominal sum for the young tree.

Although some absentee landlords could not be located, a majority of those approached agreed to participate. The residents at that time were far from a homogeneous group—students, young married couples, transients in rooming houses, administrators of junior colleges, and small-business people. But the idea had a logic and appeal of its own, and Laura Dwight motivated many to participate. One supporter of the planting, for example, was Emil "Sax" Rohmer, involved in real estate in the Back Bay, who donated two magnolias to be planted at 3 Commonwealth Avenue, a building rented by the French consulate and owned by Oliver S. Ames. Esther Ames, Oliver's wife, recalls planting a magnolia at 20 Gloucester Street and remembers that everyone in the neighborhood had heard about the street planting, either through the NABB or by word of mouth.

Much discussion took place in meetings over the merits of *Magnolia x soulangiana* versus those of *Magnolia stellata* for the Boston climate; some argued against the early magnolias altogether, nominating other species that would be less susceptible to an early-spring frost (the white magnolia petals quickly turning a dismal brown); some favored later-blooming native dogwoods (*Cornus florida*); others debated which species would be better for sunny and which for shady locations. A compromise was reached, but Laura Dwight's idea of the uniform planting of the colorful, large-petaled saucer magnolia (*Magnolia x soulangiana*) prevailed for the sunny (north) side of Commonwealth. Eyewitnesses recall two successive years of planting between 1963 and 1965: the first year saw the saucer magnolias installed on the sunny side of the street along with a few *Magnolia stellata*, the second year, dogwoods (*Cornus florida*) planted on the shady side. And, in retrospect, many

would argue that the basic decision was correct: *Magnolia x soulangiana* is a neater, more compact tree than the dogwoods, which have a looser, lighter habit and often a less exuberant display.

When asked about the project in 1981, Laura's sister, Frances Dwight, then in her eighties, wrote: "Laura had read somewhere that Boston was about as far north as the magnolias could be expected to pull through the winter." Laura Dwight had also admired the magnolias already well established and blooming profusely in front of a few Back Bay townhouses, such as the *Magnolia denudata* at 6 Commonwealth, the residence of Mrs. Montgomery Sears (now the Boston Center for Adult Education).

Witnesses of the street plantings in the 1960s give Laura Dwight full credit as the moving force behind the project: she was the one who made arrangements with nurseries to truck in plants; she arranged for MIT students living in a fraternity house on Commonwealth Avenue to donate manpower; she made sure that seedling trees were given a proper start with loam, peat moss, mulch, watering (since the Back Bay was gravel-filled land, this improvement of the soil was prudent to ensure long-term success).

An attractive price was set: eight dollars bought a smallish tree for those who were willing to wait for results (and even a young saucer magnolia produces a few choice blooms); those who wanted quicker results bought a larger tree at twenty dollars. According to Frances Dwight, "residents' gardeners were brought from as far away as Beverly and Duxbury to help the student workers. Laura found it very time-consuming, a great deal of detail with owners and nurserymen was involved."

Although many people have the impression that "hundreds" of trees make up the display, a recent survey shows that there are roughly as few as five and as many as fifteen magnolias on the sunny side of each long block of Commonwealth Avenue. In thrifty Boston fashion, the planting uses rather limited resources to make an effective, even dazzling, display. And twenty-five years after the planting, the late-April appearance of the pure-white and rich-pink blooms is one of the memorable spring sights in Boston—especially recommended for a leisurely walk on a balmy spring evening. ♣