

Ashe's magnolia: an ill-kept secret

Harold Hopkins

In the middle 1970s, in an exchange of favors, the late Harold Hillier, KBE, mailed a paperback copy of *Hilliers' Manual of Trees and Shrubs*, and a better favor never came to this author's hand. It's still consulted with some frequency and when an illustrated edition later was received, it was passed on to other hands because of the conviction that no camera could substantially enhance the masterful way this greenbacked conspectus has evaluated nearly every ornamental woody plant in the world worth having.

In the eight pages this Hillier's Nursery manual devoted to *Magnolia* species and cultivars the short entry about *Magnolia ashei* was particularly bemusing: "...a medium sized to large shrub, in all respects a miniature of *M. macrophylla*. It is strange that a plant of this quality growing in a country enjoying western civilization was not recorded in cultivation until 1926. Florida, Texas."

One suspects that this British entry was short, and erroneously included Texas in the provenance, simply because little seems known even today about this delightful plant whose range is entirely encompassed—complete with barriers that prevent its escape—by a narrow strip in the western Florida panhandle. As for listing *M. ashei* in Texas, Hillier's manual is certainly no wider of the mark than, for instance, *Hortus Third*, which also places it in Texas.

Dr. Robert Egolf once included *M. ashei* in an article on this country's two rarest magnolias (the other, *M. pyramidata*). What is possibly the best account of ashei's range and edaphic and other preferences—nay, demands—was contributed to *MAGNOLIA* in 1984 by Steven M. Riefler, then a nurseryman at Chipley, Florida. Unfortunately, the author has lost track of Steven Riefler. His piece, "Rytidospermums in Florida: The Umbrella Magnolia—the Pyramid Magnolia—the Ashe Magnolia," appeared in Issue 38, pp. 10-12.

It's this author's opinion that the Magnolia mavens in and out of the society ought to knock some heads together, perhaps

including their own, until botany and horticulture come to sensible terms about this elusive species relegated by recent writers to the status of a *M. macrophylla* subspecies.

The author had one young plant in the 1970s, but moved the same year it produced one flower, and never really saw a mature specimen until 1986 during a tour of the Magnolia Nursery at Chunchula, Alabama, with its owner John Allen Smith. Compared with *M. macrophylla*, it was as dense and compact as the descriptions stated. But the astonishing thing was that on the ends of several branchlets there were two flower buds side by side that later produced full size flowers. The paired flowers opened at the same time or within a few days of each other. John said recently that his *M. ashei* trees produce very few seed. This nursery is located about a hundred miles almost directly west of the westernmost part of the Florida panhandle's *M. ashei* range, and perhaps 10 to 15 miles north, so it seems apparent that conditions other than latitude account for the poor seed production at Chunchula, Alabama. Steven Riefler's account made it clear that *M. ashei* sticks closely to its narrow range, and outposts of more than a few miles from this range are nonexistent. Steve also speculated that this magnolia may have become genetically adapted to the conditions of its range through downsizing and other habits. For more on its native habitat, the reader is referred to Steve's article and to Dr. Egolf's article "Two Rare American Magnolias" in Issue 4, p. 6.

M. ashei was named for William Willard Ashe (1872-1932), a North Carolinian who after attending the University of North Carolina and Cornell served in his state's Forest Service from 1892 to 1909, then joined the U. S. Forest Service, where he remained until his death "of surgery" in Washington, D.C. at age 60. He rose to assistant director in District 7 and was probably the foremost authority of his day in the flora of the South Atlantic and Southeastern states. He described over 500 plants and was instrumental in helping describe *M. acuminata* var. *aurea* and *M. virginiana* var. *australis*. He was an expert in timber management, helped acquire lands for the U. S. Forestry Service, and made recommendations for establishment of a national arboretum. Writings from "Ashe's herbarium" were familiar to readers of *Rhodora* and various other journals as well as USDA publications. He fearlessly tackled the genus *Crataegus* (hawthorns) where he, Charles Sargent, and others attempted to sort out several hundred species.

M. ashei was so named by Charles A. Weatherby, 1885-1936,



*Above: The opening bloom of Magnolia ashei.
Below: Twinned buds on a plant of M. ashei at Magnolia Nursery,
Chunchula, Alabama.*



whose expertise or interest lay principally in ferns but who also described some woody plants. It is this author's belief that Weatherby probably never saw this magnolia as a growing plant but relied entirely on the evidence of herbarium specimens and descriptions supplied by W. W. Ashe. In Weatherby's description in *Rhodora* Vol 28, No. 326, pp. 35-36, February 1926, his notes appear to be written cautiously and at arm's length, but he concludes that *M. ashei* seems as much justified for consideration as a species as *M. pyramidata* and *M. cordata* (both now considered forms or varieties of *M. fraseri* and *M. acuminata* respectively).

It is noteworthy that no mention is made of double-flowering in Weatherby's nor any subsequent published descriptions this author has seen. Society member Philip G. Seitner, an expert on the Rytidospermum section, reports that he described the twin-flowering phenomenon in his presentation during the Magnolia Society meeting at St. Louis in 1979. Frederick G. Meyer, recently retired as curator of the herbarium at the U. S. National Arboretum, and long interested in *M. ashei*, said that he has described the double-flowering in a future contribution scheduled to appear in vol. 2 of the monumental *Flora of North America*, to be published in about a dozen volumes over the next several years, vol. 1 being due for publication soon. He notes that the ranges of *M. macrophylla* and *M. ashei* are disjunct and that the former never produces double flowers. The impression is that he will propose specific differentiation for the latter.

Some individuals who are quite familiar with *M. ashei* had never seen double flowers

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on their plants, and one may wonder whether the double-flowering character can vary from one part of the range to another or from one population or colony to another, or if it may be affected by maturity of the tree and such other factors as growth, available nutrients, and climactic differences. Temperatures may not be a major factor since the Magnolia Nursery is in the far south and Phil Seitner's garden in which he grows *M. ashei* is in northern Indiana, where temperatures down to -20° have left his *M. ashei* trees unscathed. Whatever the explanation, it's obvious that this twinning character has been conferred upon the hybrid offspring of *M. macrophylla* x *M. ashei* produced by Joe McDaniel in the early 1970s.

It is the author's opinion that whether or not the double flowering phenomenon qualifies *M. ashei* for specific rank, it's a character that deserves some attention. Twinning apparently is not inherent in any other magnolia in the *Rytidospermum* section, and therefore *M. ashei* is indeed one of a kind that readily passes on this double flowering character to its progeny, including its hybrid progeny when *M. macrophylla* is the other parent.

To turn once more to Sir Harold Hillier's dismay concerning this unusual magnolia, the botanical and horticultural authorities of a country enjoying western civilization and of which this unusual tree is one of its most beautiful native plants should undertake to learn more about *Magnolia ashei* than is known at present, particularly if they propose to expound on its tribal relationships. We come back to that old plaint of nurserymen and magnolia growers that a plant in the forest may be a bit different than what a person sees when viewing a piece of it on a herbarium sheet—and failing to see the forest for the tree. ❧

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