

# Magnolia campbellii alba in Bhutan

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The spring of 1990 was late in Bhutan and wet, with snowfall at elevations over about 12,500 feet in late April. Rhododendrons were generally in tight bud. Of some 31 species recorded, only 14 were seen in flower and some of those at altitude were spoiled by frost. This disappointment was redeemed by *Magnolia campbellii* var. *alba*, caught precisely at its peak of flower. The damp forest between 8-10,000 feet that clothes the eastern flanks of the Himalayan outliers falling south from Tibet into India is its "locus classicus." The cross country road through central Bhutan twists precariously eastwards along the flanks of these ridges offering spectacular views across the coniferous forest with *Tsuga domosa* and *Picea spinulosa* and up on the crests the dark and statuesque silhouettes of *Abies densa*, moving through the mist. The mixed forest is unimaginably rich in species, ranging from the warm temperate zone of *Michelia doltsopa* and *Rhododendron griffithianum* set about with evergreen oaks and laurels with *Rhododendron lindleyi* perched epiphytically in the dark tops; up through cool temperate mixed *Tsuga* and deciduous forest with *Rhododendron arboreum*, *falconeri*, *kesangiae* up to 60ft. high; *Acer*, *Betula*, *Quercus*, *Sorbus*, *Hydrangea*, and understory of *Osmanthus*, *Viburnum*, *Daphne*, *Berberis*, *Lindera*, *Litsea* and groundlings like *Gaultheria*, *Vaccinium*, *Begonia*, *Primula* and *Arisaema*. Lord of this realm is *Magnolia campbellii* var. *alba*.

In 1855, Hooker reportedly found whole mountainsides pink with masses of *Magnolia campbellii* and published the first colored plates of the pink form that year. However, he added that it was growing scarce in Sikkim due to the destruction of the forest.

In 1927, Kingdon Ward, writing in the RHS journal, described the pink form as rare and local in the forest above Gangtok, Capital of Sikkim, where scores of trees were all white flowered. Kingdon Ward's often quoted description of the road to Tibet through Sikkim refers to "the wide waves of the forest beating against the cliff, where the *Magnolia* blooms toss like white horses or lie like a fleet of pink waterlilies riding at anchor in a green surf." There are no pink forms in Nepal, according to Polunin and Stainton (*Flowers of the Himalaya*). They refer to a pink flowered form

"cultivated around Darjeeling" and rather vaguely "occurs wild in E. Himalaya."

In 1936 the Sheriff and Hicks in central Bhutan near Bumtang described *Magnolia campbellii* up to 80ft. high as "a very fine sight indeed, in full bloom (cream) and very common."

In 1937 in northern Bhutan near the Tibetan border at Pangchen, Ludlow and Sheriff saw *Magnolia campbellii* at 7,200 feet "in magnificent flower, formed a vivid white streak along the hillside." They left Gangtok for the Chumbi valley in West Bhutan and at 9,000 feet encountered "many trees of the huge white flowered *Magnolia campbellii*" around 100ft. tall.

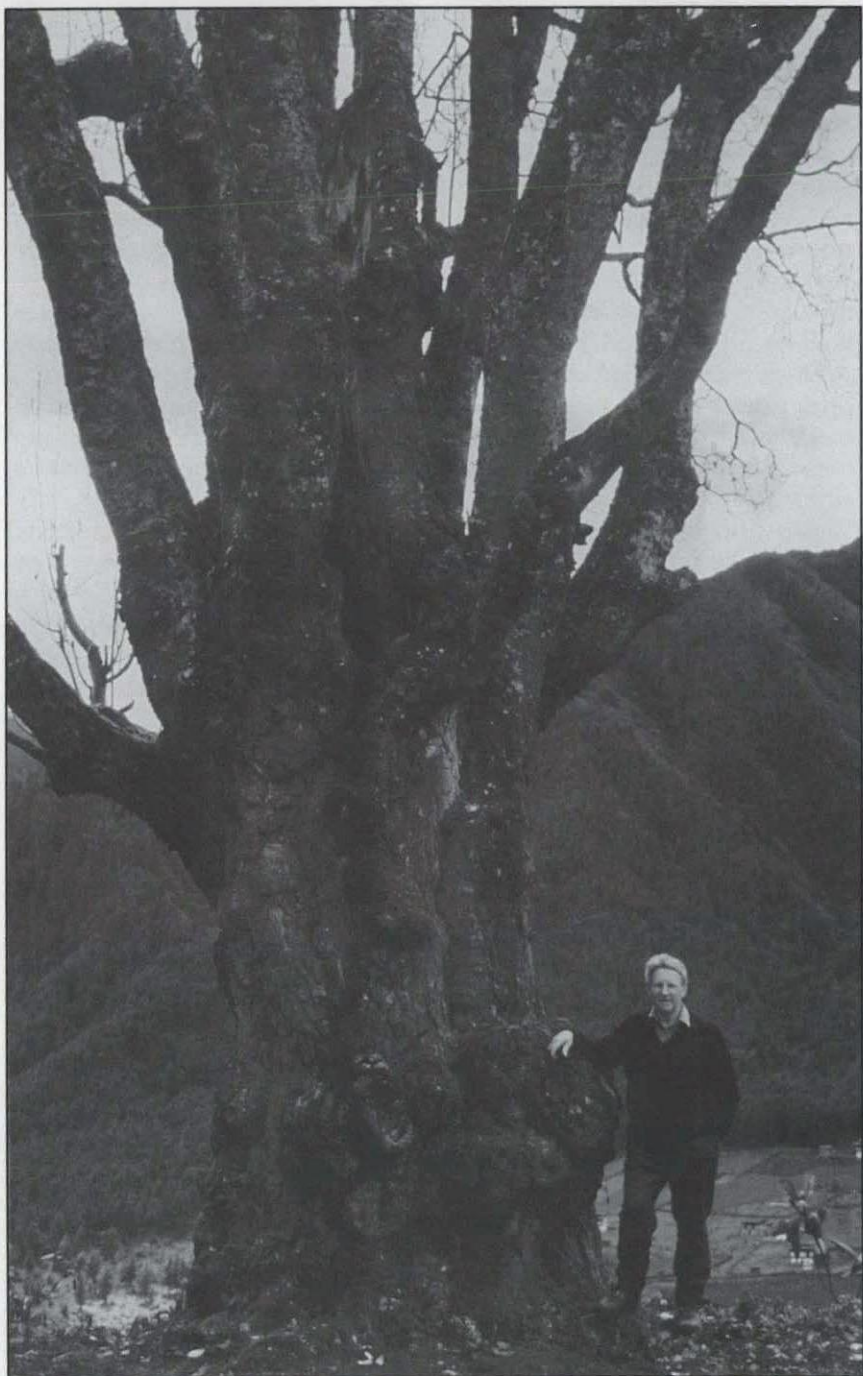
According to a vague reference by Millais, Henry Elwes had seen many "in the Himalayas" with the flowers varying greatly in color, "many of them being quite purple on the exterior whilst only a few individual specimens possessed the wonderful rose-crimson colour."

In 1990 dozens of *Magnolia campbellii* were seen in flower right across central Bhutan; not one had other than white or cream flowers. There was no suggestion of pink or purple. In the landscape all was white. On close examination some of the white flowers had an inconspicuous purple stain right at the base of the sepal, with a thin line of purple extending part way up the center of the sepal reverse. However, the pure rose form, such a strikingly beautiful tree in cultivation, was nowhere in evidence.

Neil Treseder ascribes the predominance of the white form to its probable ability to reach floescence and thus achieve seed production in a much shorter time than the pink form. It thus has a greater ability to survive the depredations of the axe and the cow.

In any event it seems that the white form is very common right across the range and the pink form extremely rare and local, ostensibly confined to Sikkim. The white form is essentially the type species. That the pink form usurped its place was essentially an accident of history.

Griffith first discovered *Magnolia campbellii* in Central Bhutan in the white form in 1938, but before his description was published, Hooker had found and named the pink form from Sikkim. Griffith died at the untimely age of 35 and his notes were published posthumously; but for his premature death and had his own notes been published earlier, the type species may have legitimately been described as the white form with the pink a local and most beautiful forma *rosea*. As Neil Treseder points out (*Magnolias*) barring this unfortunate circumstance, the species may also have been named to commemorate Griffith, along with the exquisite *Rhododendron griffithianum*, *Larix griffithiana*, *Euphorbia griffithii*, et. alia.



*Magnolia campbellii* var. *alba* at Gante Gompa.  
The author stands at the base of the great tree.

One interesting variant encountered in Bhutan was not pink, but going in the other direction, toward yellow. Most of the party were non-horticulturists and, lacking the total commitment to the truth of an eager plantsman encountering something new, could not be persuaded to describe it as yellow; in the forest its effect was perhaps a touch yellower than that of *Magnolia* 'Elizabeth,' a rich cream. It was not possible to reach a flower, but fallen tepals showed that the base of each was indeed a clear yellow fading through yellowish/cream to white at the edges. A thin purple line ran up the spine of each tepal. Buds were a pale yellow. The color was highly distinctive and its potential as a parent in conjunction with *Magnolia acuminata* or one of its hybrids conjured pictures of a true yellow flower of the size, substance and bearing of *Magnolia campbellii*, on a true forest tree. A dash of pollen could be like gold dust if one could guarantee a long enough life to be able to cash in on a successful flowering.

Up and over a ridge, deeper into the mountains of central Bhutan beyond a high pass called the Pele la, through the *Magnolia campbellii* var. *alba* and rhododendron forest there is a unique place. Down the damp north eastern flank past a stand of the elegant *Larix griffithiana*, through scrub bamboo and the blood red of *Rhododendron thomsonii* spilling down the hillside clefts in brilliant flower, is the village and monastery at Gante Gompa. This is a high marshland area at about 10,000 feet, a broad flat basin perhaps five miles long by a mile across, covered in grazed bamboo and run through with small drainage channels, and surrounded by pine clad hills.

There are a few houses strung along one flank with a school, a few asiatic skylarks above and the odd snipe below, with a wooded hill at the valley heard where the village straggles and the monastery presides. A great *Magnolia campbellii* var. *alba* stands alone in one corner of a high level terrace in the precincts, opposite huge specimens of *Juniperus recurva* and *Cupressus corneyana*. The latter is an indigenous species not seen in the wild but invariably found in association with temples and monasteries. Philippe de Spoelberch (MAGNOLIA, Fall 88) refers to this same magnolia and speculates that one day the only magnolias in Bhutan will be those that have found refuge in holy precincts. This certainly appears already to be the case with *Cupressus corneyana*, but *Magnolia campbellii* var. *alba* is still very common in relatively remote forest and hopefully not at real risk.

This magnolia was a true giant and clearly of great age. The diameter of the trunk was estimated at about 6ft.; it was ridged and uneven and set about with ancient burrs and irregular outgrowths covered in moss and hosting many small seedlings with at least two species of rhododendron, *Rosa sericea*, *Berberis insignis* and *Jasminum humile* sprouting from its crevices. Its great



The "yellow" form of *Magnolia campbellii* var. *alba*.

central trunk rose to about 12ft. before dividing into eight of nine subsidiary trunks to a height of about 70ft. and a spread of even more. It had evidently been coppiced or beheaded by storm many years before as the original central trunk had rotted, and it was hollow at the center. We had missed the best of the flower. In bloom this tree must be one of the wonders of the world—an ancient tree gracing an ancient monastery and each adding stature to the other.

This splendid, venerable *Magnolia campbellii* var. *alba* was a fitting symbol of Bhutan—a country of mountain, forest and river, a kingdom of immense floral riches unchanged for thousands of years. Looking at this great tree it is hard to believe that had Hooker stood on this spot a century and a half ago he would not have introduced the white form of *M. campbellii* as the type species and the true representative of the great magnolia of the Himalayas. ❧