

To prune or not to prune...

Frances Parker

In one of the first Magnolia Society journals, Ernest Iufer said, "To let a young tree grow without correcting by pruning is exactly the same as never correcting a little boy. You will soon find out what kind of a monster you are creating." (1)

I took his words to heart. In my efforts to create a magnolia woods I was quite concerned about the shaping and training of my young trees, and I was in a dilemma. There is relatively little literature on the subject, much of it conflicting, and nothing at all has been written in the Society publications after its second year. Most experts say that magnolias basically need very little pruning. They are well behaved plants, but I found some of my trees obviously needed a guiding hand to be well behaved.

I agonized over what to do and when to do it. There were branches going off at strange angles, limbs were crossed and competing, and many trees looked too congested with multiple stems. Should I limb up the trees or allow them to develop naturally; what would my two foot shoots look like in twenty years?

My first lesson in pruning came by default. I am plagued by deer, and a thriving 'Star Wars' was rubbed by a deer four years ago, destroying the leader and leaving only one low branch below the shredded bark. It responded by putting out fresh shoots, creating a new leader and looked whole again in another year. We then had a severe ice storm and a pine tree fell right on the struggling plant. It was again devastated—and so was I. It had bloomed for the first time and I had seen the potential it held. I thought the tree was jinxed; would it survive? Again it rallied, making up for its missing limbs and now, two years later the damage is hardly

noticeable. It stands ready to put on a wonderful spring show with over a hundred buds covering its twelve feet.

When I realized the results of such drastic pruning, I took my courage in hand and pruned an 'Iolanthe' which had two seriously crossed competing leaders. I looked at the tree for days debating what to do. Finally I took out the pruning saw and off came half of the tree. I looked at my butchering in dismay but it too has put out new growth to balance itself into a wonderfully shaped tree. I had done the right thing.

With these successes and a lot of advice and counsel from Magnolia Society members I've gradually developed more confidence and my own set of guidelines which seem to suit my garden.

It seems safest to prune summer blooming trees in late winter or early spring and prune spring blooming trees immediately following their bloom. There is some discrepancy of ideas on this timing. One school of thought espouses the theory that the best time to prune is when the clippers are in your hand, but the others warn that a tree can bleed to death if it is pruned while the sap is rising. And common horticultural practice warns against pruning anything too late in the season which may retard its dormancy. I feel more comfortable erring on the safe side.

My first pruning removes any dead or diseased wood, suckers arising from the upper side of a horizontal limb which may attempt to take over the main leader and would cause tieback in the tree, any growth from below a graft, and deformed or crossing limbs. It is also recommended that excess growth resulting in long gangling branches be shortened, and very crowded growth that might lead to shading and dieback be eliminated. That's the easy part.

In some cases remedial pruning is recommended. If no growth occurs on a tree in the first season after it's planted, as frequently happens if there is a drought before it reroots adequately, the tree should be pruned back severely while it is dormant during the winter. The main growth impulse of a tree can be diverted to the leader by removing the tips of side branches. If the foliage of newly planted evergreen magnolias



TMS tour group members inspecting an as yet unpruned magnolia at the garden of Thierry de la Motte Baraffe, Belgium.

turns brown from the top down, immediate and drastic measures are needed. All growth can be shortened to within an inch or two of the main stem to try to save the plant. (2)

The next decision concerns whether to make trees single stem or leave them with multiple stems. My aim here is to have the tree in the most natural condition possible. Any tree which has a natural tendency to be shrubby such as the stellata, or any tree with stellata blood I choose to leave multiple stemmed and twiggy with a minimum of pruning. I believe a tree which is going to be very large ought to be single stem. It will be healthier and less likely to split. In the middle ground are such trees as *M. virginiana*. These won't be so large that they can only support a main trunk and can be very graceful with multiple stems. I have virginianas and other medium sized magnolias in both conditions and both are lovely. It's a matter of choice.

The last major decision is whether or not to limb up a tree. This I think is purely a matter of aesthetics. What do you want the tree to look like? Do you need to get near the tree for mowing or walking? Again, I prefer to leave my trees in their

natural growth pattern. If they naturally have low branches nearing the ground I think they should stay that way. A very mature tree can be incredibly beautiful and picturesque with huge sweeping lower branches. They create giant cavernous enclosures which give me the same feeling I had as a child when I climbed into the sheltering branches of a leafy canopy. In the case of grandifloras, the tree will take care of its own litter problem if all the low branches are left on the tree.

One of the lessons I learned from flower arranging is that an arrangement should look as though a bird could fly through it. The design will probably be improved by removing flowers rather than adding more flowers. That negative space is so important to the design. The same is true of trees. The open spaces between branches will create a more beautiful tree. Cutting flowers for arrangements or evergreen foliage for decorating will only enhance the tree. I have a friend who always prunes her grandifloras heavily at Christmas time to create massive arrangements and her trees always look the better for it.

With these experiences I no longer quake about using clippers and loppers. The magnolia is indeed a most well behaved tree with a generous and forgiving nature. ♡

(1) Iufer, Ernest. *Newsletter of the American Magnolia Society*, Vol. 3, Number 1, page 7.

(2) Treseder, Neil C. *Magnolias*, Faber & Faber, London, 1978, pages 196-7.

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