

Magnolia 'Elizabeth'—The Woman Behind the Name

Dorothy J. Callaway

In my 1994 book, *The World of Magnolias*, I stated that *Magnolia* 'Elizabeth' was named in honor of Elizabeth Scholz, director of the Brooklyn Botanic Garden. Two years after the book was published, I received a kind note from Cynthia Giangcaspro, curator of Magnolia Plaza at the Brooklyn Botanic Garden. Cynthia told me that the plant was named in honor of another Elizabeth; the original publication in the journal *HortScience* [Volume 14, Number 2, page 195, 1979], which Cynthia sent, confirmed this.

Even prior to the publication of my book, there was confusion regarding whom this plant honors with its name. [I'm happy to know the confusion did not start with me, though I apologize for my part in continuing the problem!] To set the record straight, *Magnolia* 'Elizabeth' was named in honor of **Elizabeth Van Brunt**.

Elizabeth van Brunt (1893-1986) was a resident of the Kitchawan area (Westchester County) New York and was a well-known authority on old roses and herbs. Beginning in 1944, she was honorary curator of herbs at the Brooklyn Botanic Garden and was a member of the governing committee in the 1950s and 1960s. She wrote many articles for national horticultural publications and was the editor of the *Brooklyn Botanic Garden Handbook on Herbs*, published in 1958 and also edited the 1982 updated edition. Miss Van Brunt was a founding member of the Herb Society of America; its publication, *The Herbarist*, carried many of her articles as well as her paintings of individual herbs. She was also a founding member of the Kitchawan Auxiliary of the Brooklyn Botanic Garden Research Center, and taught classes on herbs at the Garden, where her students lovingly called her "the Herb Lady."

In 1950, Elizabeth Van Brunt's father died and bequeathed a 223-acre tract of land adjacent to the Croton Reservoir in Kitchawan to his four daughters. Elizabeth wished for the land to be preserved and so persuaded her sisters to transfer the land to the Brooklyn Botanic Garden. In 1956, legal steps were taken to implement this transfer, which took several years. This tract of land later came to be known as the BBG's Research Center at Kitchawan. It was on this land that the BBG's magnolia breeding program was carried out, and where the original plant of BBG #391 (later named *Magnolia* 'Elizabeth') and its siblings were planted for evaluation. From 1972 to 1975 observations were made on these plants. Seedling #391 was selected for introduction, named 'Elizabeth' in honor of Ms. Van Brunt and, in 1977, received plant patent number 4145.

Ironically, the Kitchawan Research Station no longer belongs to the Brooklyn Botanic Garden. In 1991, the Garden decided to close the center, and the land reverted back to the Van Brunt family. Presumably, the original trees of 'Elizabeth' and her siblings are still in existence on the property, which was sold by the Van Brunt family in spring of 1999.

'Elizabeth' represented the first yellow precocious magnolia to become popular and, to this day, is still one of the most well-known of the yellows. It seems fitting that such a tree should honor Elizabeth Van Brunt, a woman who was so important to the horticultural world for so many years. 🌿

