

Magnolia dianica and *Magnolia virginiana* 'Autumn Queen'

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When we traveled together in Bhutan, Fran Parker asked me if I'd like to write an article about Magnoliaceae. Like one does, I said "yes," thinking Magnoliaceae gives me plenty of scope, too much perhaps, and so time drifted by. Then, yesterday, when out in our garden (doing my impersonation of George Washington by cutting down a cherry tree) I happened to see a tiny branch with flowers at the base of my *Magnolia virginiana* 'Autumn Queen.' My fellow tree cutter asked what they were and I told him the story of how I came to graft the magnolia onto a *Michelia* [now *magnolia*] rootstock.

About ten or twelve years ago, I was given some stems of this New Zealand selection of *Magnolia virginiana* and decided that as well as trying cuttings, I would also graft a few. But what to graft them onto was the

problem. I spotted some seedling *Magnolia dianica* (formerly *Michelia yunnanensis*) and thought they might work, and so they did. As you can see from the photograph, the graft was made about 15in



Magnolia virginiana 'Autumn Queen' grafted on *M. dianica* in front of the fallen cherry

(38cm) above the ground and there is very little in the way of a graft distortion. Really, only the stem color of the black-y grey *M. dianica* and the softer brown of the magnolia give any clue of a graft.

When it came time to plant the tree I remembered how *M. virginiana* is often described as growing in wet or swampy places and so I planted the bush right beside a stream without giving a thought to the fact the roots are *M. dianica*, which in their native lands around Kunming in Yunnan (western China) are often bone dry. Anyway, as you can see the *M. dianica* copes well with wet feet too.

In fact, the more I grow this wonderful magnolia the more it impresses me in every way. I first grew the plant, or should I say plants, back in 1986 and I believe this was the first time anyone had grown them outside of China.

Since then I have grown over forty different clones from seed and have been impressed at the way they tolerate wet ground, hot dry banks, clay soil, hot sun, or dry shade. In fact whatever the conditions, the plants seem to thrive. When you add the huge bounty of deliciously scented spring flowers, it's all too good to be true.

When I was offered *M. dianica* seeds back in 1986, I accepted even though I didn't know the plant and could find no reference to it. But as a relative of the

fabulous *M. doltsopa* and the intriguing *M. figo*, it had to have potential. *M. doltsopa* has long been a favorite of mine as it begins flowering on the shortest day or winter solstice in our garden and the flowers have a heav-



Magnolia dianica

enly scent. *Magnolia figo* is not without its charms, being a dense evergreen shrub with a superb but elusive scent from its partially opened grey and purple flowers. So does *M. dianica* come up to expectations? Well it's a dense evergreen upright shrub with small dark green leaves. The hairy flower buds are an attractive tawny brown and the flowers are a creamy white and open fully to reveal their close relationship to magnolias. The flowers are borne in profusion and are superbly scented like nutmeg with the bonus of the bush being in flower for four to five weeks. Right now I'm looking out of the window at four clones literally smothered in white blossom. It appears to be an ideal garden shrub and would fit quite comfortably into any size garden, growing happily in sun or shade and tolerates pruning. It seems fairly hardy, growing in inland frosty sites in New Zealand.

Roy Lancaster in his book, *Travels in China, A Plantsmans Paradise*, describes it as a common plant on the hills around Kunming in Yunnan where it is fairly dwarf in the open, but growing as much as 12ft (3.7m) in a sheltered site. He describes it as being closely related to the Port Wine magnolia, *M. figo* and goes on to say "*Michelia yunnanensis* [*Magnolia dianica*] would most assuredly flourish if only someone could successfully introduce it. Several times I have received seeds from Yunnan and, although distributed to growers of proven skill, I have yet to hear of germination. Perhaps seed has been allowed to dry out before being sent to me, but some day someone will succeed and I look forward to seeing it in British cultivation." I'm hopeful the plant will soon be available in the USA, as well.

We have recently named several clones of *M. dianica* including a knee-high dwarf version. Samples have been sent to Pat McCracken in Raleigh, NC to trial so hopefully these wondrous plants will soon grace your gardens, too.

The burning question many of you will be asking is how much cold will they tolerate? It's likely it's only a zone 8 plant but they may survive zone 7 or 6 if they get enough of the summer heat they love to harden the wood. The other possibility is they can be grown in tubs like *Ficus benjamina*.

Nota bene: The 'Autumn Queen' clone of *Magnolia virginiana* was selected by the famous New Zealand magnolia breeder Os Blumhardt, who recently died. Os was also responsible for *Magnolia* 'Star Wars.' The *M.* 'Autumn Queen' flowers throughout the year in our climate. There's hardly a day of the year when I can't find a bloom somewhere on the bush.