

## Plants and People: *Magnolia obovata* 'Lydia'

Tim Boland

In 1968, amateur horticulturist Polly Hill received a plain mailing envelope from Japan; inside was a small, unassuming seedling of a Japanese white-barked magnolia (*Magnolia obovata*). Polly's notations indicate that the seedling was received under its former name, *Magnolia hypoleuca*. Eighteen years later the resulting tree was registered as *Magnolia obovata* 'Lydia.' In this article I look back at the history of the Lydia magnolia while also looking forward to its potential for greater use in landscapes and gardens.

In 1928, Polly Hill lived in Japan after graduating from Vassar College. She taught gym and music at a school for girls in Tokyo. The experience was rewarding and it fostered a fond affection for both the country and its horticultural traditions. Decades later on a return trip to Japan with her son Jeff, she asked friend and director of Longwood Gardens, Dr. Russell Siebert, if she could accomplish anything horticultural while in Japan. He encouraged her to meet with amateur plantsman, Dr. Tsuneshige Rokujo. The year was 1957 and her meeting and subsequent sharing of plants with Dr. Rokujo led to many of Polly Hill's most famous plant introductions, including the Lydia magnolia and her famed North Tisbury azaleas.

In addition to his horticultural experimentation, Dr. Rokujo was a renowned cancer research scientist who frequently travelled abroad on the medical lecture circuit. When the opportunity arose, he was quick to gather seeds of lo-



Dr. Tsuneshige Rokujo in his experimental garden, Tokyo, Japan.



The stunning flower of *Magnolia obovata* 'Lydia.'

cal plants and share them with friends. He also maintained a small, but impressive, experimental garden at his home in Tokyo. There Dr. Rokujo performed several hybrid crosses of *Rhododendron* and also experimented with *Magnolia*. Polly was the beneficiary of many of these experiments; Dr. Rokujo sent seed or seedling progeny to Polly and she would reciprocate by growing the plants with care and a keen eye.

Seeds or seedlings arrived from Dr. Rokujo throughout a 30-year period as Polly developed her own experimental garden in West Tisbury, Massachusetts, on the island of Martha's Vineyard. With many of Dr. Rokujo special plants, Polly took extra care to plant them in a protected area. Known as Polly's Play Pen, this large rectangular area was surrounded by tall fencing offering protection from deer and rabbits. A single bare-root seedling of *Magnolia obovata* was planted in the Play Pen in 1968. In 1983 the plant flowered, and Polly noted that the outer tepals had a slight flush of pink, which is common for the species. Upon further observation and comparison to other white-barked magnolias, she noted it had a more upright oval habit. Polly had numerous visitors to her garden and she frequently asked for their opinion. After famed American horticulturist David Leach visited the garden, he encouraged Polly to register the distinctive magnolia as a cultivated variety. Polly named the plant *Lydia* after her youngest granddaughter, the daughter of her son Jeff. In 1986 Peter Del Tredici of the Arnold Arboretum registered *Magnolia obovata* 'Lydia'; it was described for the first time in *Magnolia*, the journal of the Magnolia Society International, Vol. 42 (1986–87).

Recognizing the value of the plant, Polly sent scion wood to nurseries and arboreta. She planted a clone of the tree in 1988. The plant did not have the vigor of the parent tree and struggled until deaccessioned in 2003. However, another tree was sent to her son Jeff who had purchased a home in the Capitol Hill section of Washington, DC. There, planted as a sidewalk tree, it prospered and today its oval form marks the entrance of their home with grace and beauty. Jeff Hill reports that the roots of the tree have found their way into the city's sewer and water system, a fortuitous benefit of urban planting, at least for the tree!

Dr. Rokujo passed away in 1993 and Polly Hill, in 2007. Their story and their plants live on at the Polly Hill Arboretum as does

the Polly Hill Arboretum's interest in the temperate flora of Japan and the tradition of horticultural experimentation. The Arboretum has completed two seed-collection expeditions to Japan during this decade. On one trip to Honshu, Japan, in the fall of 2005, I observed hundreds of white-barked magnolia trees among the mountain forests as a secondary growth species. At 4,921ft (1500m) and above, *Magnolia obovata* appeared in almost every open mountainside niche often accompanied by the giant dogwood, *Cornus controversa*. In the wild it was easy to observe a wide range of forms—nar-



The Lydia Magnolia as it appears in Washington, DC, USA.  
(Photo by Jeff Hill)

row, oval trees, fat broad trees, and diminutive stunted trees—nature displays all its variability on the disturbed mountainsides.

Today our Lydia magnolia stands 55ft (17m) tall and is distinct in its oval upright habit. While the species is best reserved for open areas or parks, 'Lydia' has potential for use in more confined areas. The Arboretum has been active the last few years dispersing scion wood to interested nurseries with the hope it may receive wider use and appreciation in the landscape. I am convinced it will, as if it can make it as a street tree in our nation's capitol, Washington DC, it can make it almost anywhere!

*All photos by Tim Boland except as noted.*