

Magnolias at Willowwood

by Benjamin Blackburn

In early spring of 1911, an embarrassingly large gift of plants from the Dorrance cousins in Kingston, Pennsylvania, gave the first impetus to plantings of Magnolias at Willowwood. The entire freight car of woody and herbaceous treasures, held at the Delaware and Lackawanna siding at Gladstone, was found to contain several strong plants of a Soulange hybrid, probably the Van Houtte form of 'Alexandrina.' Now fine mature specimens about 25 feet high and with several trunks, these dominate respective corners in Pan's Garden north of the house, another east of the house, and a third by the old spring near the bend in the drive.

The next Magnolias planted at Willowwood were Sweetbays, collected as small plants in the New Jersey Pine Barrens in 1912. Henry and Robert Tubbs had taken their parents and sister "down Jersey" for a day's outing in their redoubtable Reo motorcar, and after getting stuck in loose sand at an innocent appearing but thoroughly treacherous spot near Speedwell, the excursionists had more bad luck in having a flat tire.

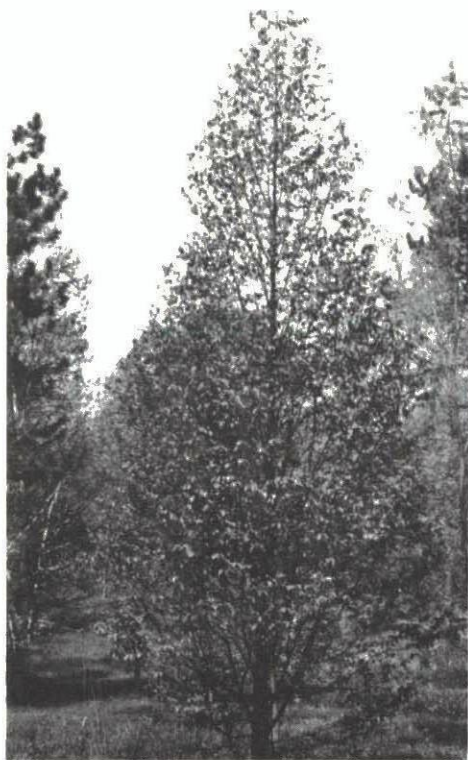
Finally, with these upsets passed, all were cheered and revived by the contents of the picnic basket, and the horticulturally influenced members of the party dug several plant treasures they had discovered along the small stream with velvety black waters where they had been resting. Small seedling or sucker plants of the abundant Magnolias were carved out in blocks of the moist peaty soil, and packed in the car with a few Swamp Azaleas and Clethras for the brook edges at Willowwood. Despite some doubts about crowding and weight, a few cushions of Pyxie-moss, found later in Oak scrub, were added, and the long drive home was started. The outing ended happily, with everyone very tired, very glad to be home, and planning where to plant their collections.

Three of the Sweetbays survive, in the woodland garden area along the brook, the tallest about 40 feet high and with a 7-inch trunk. Clethras and Azaleas have made 8-foot masses in the same area, but as invariably in later collections also, the Pyxie-moss subsisted only a few months and was gone after a year.

Ornamental plantings were very limited

during the years of World War I, but by the 1920s Robert Tubbs had become keenly enthusiastic about new trees and made notable additions. He sought advice from Sargent and Wilson at the Arnold Arboretum, and was in touch with Dr. Frederick Coville, of the Department of Agriculture, working with Miss Elizabeth White at Whitesbog in making Highbush Blueberry selections.

In 1928 Wilson sent bud-wood of the Magnolia which came to be called Waterlily and seeds or small plants of the northern forest form of Kobus, Hokkaido Magnolia, in 1930. These last opened a fascinating horticultural chapter at Willowwood, and three of the original Hokkaido Magnolias remain—specimens 40-70 feet in height and with trunks to 18 inches in diameter. Both flowering and fruiting displays are impressive, but even enthusiasts admit that individual



Magnolia 'Wada's Memory' at Willowwood.

flowers of Hokkaido Magnolias, mostly white but occasionally pinkish at the base of the stamens and admittedly skimpy with 6-9 petals, hardly compare with many others. Delicate lance-shaped sepals, about ½ inch long, are easily detectable.

While flowers of the Kobus type may seem meager, the fruits at least are not surpassed in their brocade coloring and design, and this display lasts several weeks. Seedlings volunteer at Willowwood in abundance, and after a restrained start for two years, they gain momentum and almost spring into any open space above them. One volunteer has surprised us with dusty-pink petals; it does not promise to make superlative listings, but echoes the interesting color range appearing in other derivatives of the species. These self-sown seedlings have been given away in some quantity, but in later years their abundance actually makes this method of control impractical because of their numbers and the time required to supervise even the best-intentioned friends and diggers.

As for the much-repeated complaint that *Magnolia Kobus* and its variety *borealis* are slow to flower, one comes to regard this with suspicion. Grafted plants more or less aside (and their troublous problems with graft cankers often appearing in later years falling where they may), one is inclined to believe that seedlings of the Kobus group flower at about the same age as their congeners; most grow so much faster that we may forget a plant is actually only five or six years old and their scattering of flowers is spaced over a larger framework of branches.

The bud-wood branchlets of the new pink Star Magnolia from E. H. Wilson were hastened to a nurseryman friend in the northern part of the county, and in due time small plants were starting at Willowwood. Two of these Waterlily Magnolias survive, and their story is told in Neil Treseder's gratifying and comprehensive work, *Magnolias* (Faber, 1978). One specimen is 14½ feet high and the other about 25 feet; both have the rounded habit of Star Magnolias, but are proportionately higher; it is natural to imagine that *M. liliflora* 'from the next block' may have had some parental influence, as chromosome counts seem to indicate in the case of *stellata rubra*.

Magnolia grandiflora, needless to say, has been a great favorite here, and Robert Tubbs's plantings of the 1920s have been our best specimens, surpassing all later additions. The

best and largest has been 'Exmouth,' from E. A. Wohler's exciting nursery in 1926. A small, now decrepit greenhouse directly to the west has diverted drying winds for more than half a century, and the 30-foot tree has grown and flowered admirably, usually well into September. Heavy damage has occurred in recent winters, starting with a traitorous false spring in March, 1977, and the old tree is failing disturbingly.

In later years the collection has increased slowly, sometimes by layers from admired specimens in our area and by seeds from abroad. Seeds from the Loebner hybrid, 'Willowwood,' which arose spontaneously here in a dense mass of *Pachysandra* early in the 1940s (*M. Kobus* × *M. Kobus* f. *stellata*)—and sendings from England and Italy—have produced valued additions, not without questions and surprises. A 15-foot specimen along the Wood Walk, from Thompson & Morgan of Ipswich, England, in 1954, is supposed to be *M. × highdownensis*, but is clearly of close affinity to *Kobus*, and so does not conform to the assumed parentage of the tree at Highdown in Sussex.

After reading and re-reading Sir Peter Smithers's succinct comment on a current re-naming of *Magnolia denudata*, the lovely Chinese Yulan, in the *AMS Journal* (XV, 2, 1979), it may be appropriate to note that the Buc'hoz/Dandy names are considered quite unacceptable and invalid, and are not used at Willowwood. The fact that Dandy himself abandoned them as valid names, in a sort of "middle period," and referred to them as early synonyms of *M. denudata* and *M. liliflora*, invalidates them under the International Code of Botanical Nomenclature. Article 43 states, "A name which is not accepted by the author who published it is not validly published."

The Buc'hoz names were introduced in his book *Plantes Nouvellement Découvertes* in Paris, 1779 (a book most difficult to find in libraries in this country), and careful study of the copy in the British Museum (Natural History) in London two years ago revealed serious faults to accepting the two drawings of Plate 19 and the text on page 21 as valid type descriptions of two species. Mr. Dandy wished to call *Magnolias*. Dandy's paper proposing transfer of the Buc'hoz names under *Lassonia* to *Magnolia* appeared in 1934 in the *Journal of Botany*. In his *Bibliography of Cultivated Trees and Shrubs*, 1949, Alfred Rehder of the Arnold Arboretum gave his opinion in a line



Magnolia kobus flower, as naturalized at Willowood.

of abbreviated Latin under *M. liliflora* and the same under *M. denudata*: "Description inadequate and false."

Until a more detailed review is completed, it must suffice to say here (with the Editor's indulgence)—that the Buc'hoz/Dandy names are illegitimate because (1) only the petals drawn by the Chinese artist may have been taken from Magnolias, and Buc'hoz himself described them as quite like Tulip petals; other diagnostic parts shown and described are all un-Magnolia like, with (2) about 35 stamens making an open bowl or cup, (3) complete lack of a spindle-like receptacle with spirally attached flower parts, (4) strange multi-ribbed structures at the base of each flower interpreted as fringed calyces, and (5) detailed roughnesses of the bark without any sign of the stipule scars so easily noted in every *Magnolia*.

Another article in the Code provides that "A name of a taxon must be rejected if its characteristics were derived from two or more entirely discordant elements, unless it is possible to select one of these elements as a satisfactory type." Without other acceptable and accurate diagnostic parts, petals alone, Tulip-like, Magnolia-like, or otherwise, are entirely unsatisfactory for typification of species. Rehder's decision, "inadequate and false," still applies, and we must reinvest *Magnolia denudata* and *M. liliflora* in their rightful positions of highest admiration and respect.

The Willowood record is summarized in the alphabetical listing, which gives origin and date for the first or the most successful planting under each name. Later plantings,

though important, may not be included. Also not included are the failures, records of the many others tried and lost. This regretted group includes *Campbellii* and its variety *mollicomata*, the true ivory-white *denudata*, *pyramidata*, *Sargentiana*, several *Soulangiana* selections, *Veitchii*, and *Wieseneri*. Though tempered in this bowl-shaped valley, our winters are still too severe for some of these. Temperatures rather frequently dip below 10 degrees Fahrenheit for a few hours, and in years of record to -9 degrees. Successes with numerous plants of reputedly tender qualities leave hope for more encouraging results in different locations and more numerous trials, rather than just a few plants. Repeated failures with ones like *pyramidata* and *Wieseneri*, both tried again and again and favored with the most beguiling attentions, have come to be attributed to an unrelenting and even malign garden influence which we do not seem able to appease nor circumvent!

MAGNOLIA LIST

Plants in botanical and horticultural categories growing at Willowood on January 1, 1980:

- M. acuminata* Linnaeus; Cucumber-tree (Robbins, Ashford, N.C., about 1925)
- M. Ashei* Weatherby; Sand-hill Magnolia (Mrs. J. Norman Henry, Gladwyne, Pa., 1952)
- M. cordata* Michaux; Yellow Magnolia (Wwd seedling from an original from Bobbink & Atkins, Rutherford, N.J. 1947)
- M. cylindrica* Wilson (Plant from L. S. Fortescue, Devonshire, England, 1973)
- M. Dawsoniana* Rehder & Wilson (Gossler Farms, Springfield, Ore., 1970)
- M. denudata* Desrousseau; Yulan (Drew University, Madison, N.J., 1957)
- M. Fraseri* Walter; Fraser Magnolia (Robbins, 1940)
- M. grandiflora* Linnaeus Southern Magnolia (Glen St. Mary Nurseries, Fla., early 1920s)
 - c. 'Edith Bogue' (Dr. James Gunckel, Rutgers University, 1973)
 - c. 'Exmouth' (E. A. Wohlert, Narberth, Pa., 1926; Thomas Buchter, then at Skylands Botanical Garden, Ringwood, N.J., 1973)
 - c. 'Little Gem' (National Arboretum, Washington, 1974)
- M. × highdownensis* Dandy; Highdown

- Magnolia (A single plant from seed from Thompson & Morgan, Ipswich, England, 1952, ? true)
- M. hypoleuca* Siebold & Zuccarini; Silverleaf Magnolia (Yoshiharu Matsumura, Nikko Botanical Garden, Nikko, Japan, 1948; Gossler Farms, 1970; Buchter, 1975)
- M. Kobus* de Candolle; Kobus Magnolia (F & F Nurseries, Springfield, N.J., about 1930; many volunteer seedlings)
- var. *borealis* Sargent; Hokkaido Magnolia (E. H. Wilson, Arnold Arboretum, 1930; many WWd volunteer seedlings)
 - * *M. liliflora* c. 'Betty' (Robert Talley, Gulf Stream Nursery, Wachapreague, Va., 1979)
 - * *M. liliflora* c. 'Ricki' (Talley, 1979)
 - * *M. liliflora* c. 'Susan' (Talley, 1979)
 - f. *Loebneri* (Kache) Blackburn c. 'Leonard Messel' (The Lady Anne Palmer, Devonshire, England, 1978)
 - c. 'Merrill' (Talley, 1955)
 - c. 'Willowwood' (spontaneous seedling at WWd, early 1940s)
 - f. *stellata* (Siebold & Zuccarini) Blackburn Star Magnolia (grafted plant on *M. Kobus* root, probably Bobbink & Atkins, about 1927; Wm. Flemer III, Princeton Nurseries, 1953)
 - c. 'Centennial' (Gary Koller, Arnold Arboretum, 1977)
 - c. 'Rosea' (New York City plant market, about 1912)
 - c. 'Royal Star' (Peter Vermeulen, John Vermeulen & Son, Neshanic, N.J., 1959, 1962)
 - c. 'Rubra' (Henry Hohman, Kingsville Nurseries, 1952)
 - c. 'Waterlily' (bud-wood from E. H. Wilson, 1928)
- M. liliflora* Desrousseaux; Lily Magnolia (F & F, about 1928)
- M. macrophylla* Michaux; Largeleaved Magnolia (Mrs. Everett Rowley, Hanover, N.J., 1973)
- M. officinalis* Rehder & Wilson; Spice Magnolia (seeds from Daniel Barmes, Villa Taranto Gardens, Pallanza, Italy, 1972)
- var. *biloba* Rehder & Wilson Spice Magnolia (Daniel Barmes, 1972)
- M. × Proctoriana* Rehder emend. Blackburn in Bailey 5,1,1957 Proctor Magnolia (Seeds, Bernard Harkness, Department of Parks, Rochester, N.Y., 1958; WWd seedlings of Wada's Memory Magnolia 1975)
- c. 'Wada's Memory' (Brian Mulligan, University of Washington Arboretum, Seattle, 1956; layer plants from the preceding, 1975)
- M. salicifolia* (Siebold & Zuccarini) Maximowicz; Anise Magnolia (Hohman, 1951; Harkness 1956, 1962)
- M. Sieboldii* K. Koch; Oyama Magnolia (oldest record lost, about 1930; seeds from Walter Ingwersen, Birch Farm Nursery, Gravetye, Sussex, England, 1951; John Alexander III, Arnold Arboretum, 1979)
- M. sinensis* (Rehder & Wilson) Stapf (seeds from University of Washington Arboretum, 1978, plants indoors)
- M. × Soulangiana* Hamelin; Soulang Magnolia, a large-flowered selection, perhaps 'Alexandrina' of Van Houtte (Dorrance, Kingston, Pa., 1911)
- c. 'Alba Superba' (Hohman, 1972)
 - c. 'Alexandrina' (William Ladd, Mendham, N.J. 1948)
 - c. 'Brozzoni' (Gossler Farms, 1970)
 - c. 'Grace McDade' (Dr. John Wister, Swarthmore College, Swarthmore, Pa., 1952)
 - c. 'Lenne' (Layer from a fine specimen, Morristown, N.J., 1953)
 - c. 'Rustica Rubra' (Tingle Nursery Co., Pittsville, Md., 1920s)
- M. Sprengeri* Pampanini (U.S. Plant Introduction Station, Glenn Dale, Md., 1964)
- c. 'Diva' (Jacques Legendre and Robert Talley, Gulf Stream Nursery, 1966)
- M. × Thompsoniana* (Sweet) J. St. Hilaire; Thompson Magnolia (Vermeulen, 1975)
- M. tripetala* Linnaeus; Umbrella Magnolia (Tingle, about 1927; Mrs. Everett Rowley, 1973)
- M. virginiana* Linnaeus; Sweetbay (collected N.J. Pine Barrens, 1912 and later; Tingle, early 1930s)
- var. *australis* Sargent; Southern Sweetbay (Suffolk County, N.Y., collection beneath very large garden specimen brought from Louisiana, 1951; National Arboretum ex seeds from Bethel Springs Tenn., 1969)
- M. Wilsonii* (Finet & Gagnepain) Rehder; Wilson Magnolia (seeds from University of Washington Arboretum, 1978, plants indoors)
- Benjamin Blackburn, administrator, has lived and worked at Willowwood since 1946, taught botany at Drew University, Madison, New Jersey, for 22 years and is a professor emeritus of Drew.*