

# Magnolias by the Bay

by Frank B. Galyon, Jr.

On Saturday, 25 February 1989, we began our bus tour with a morning trip to Filoli. We were divided into groups of ten or more, and each group was provided with a very knowledgeable docent who escorted us through the house and its sixteen acres of gardens. In the walled garden were examples of various citrus trees, most of which were espaliered. They showed some damage from the rather severe freeze which occurred two weeks before our visit.

Throughout the garden the huge clipped *Taxus* specimens were a dominant feature. Several of them were in a severely pruned condition from which one might assume they would never recover. There were, however, some specimens which had been pruned as severely one year prior to our visit and which had recovered with renewed foliage and were very much alive.

The north-south axis of the garden paralleled the transverse wing of the Filoli mansion. One of the most dramatic vistas in the garden was looking up the hill to the south with huge clipped yews on either side of the grassy path - an unforgettable scene.

Of course we came to see Magnolias and Magnolias we did see, but I should like to describe other plant material that caught my attention before going into the Magnoliaceae. Along the paths that we followed were myriad plants of *Daphne odora aureomarginata* in full bloom. Their marvelous scent was everywhere, and in spite of that, I got my nose down to their flowers more

than once to enjoy their lemony-sweet fragrance more fully.

Camellias were at peak bloom also. There was quite a variety of *Camellia japonica* cultivars, but much more striking were the huge blooms of *Camellia reticulata* on plants being grown out-of-doors -- such a thing is impossible in the eastern United States.

All throughout the interior of Filoli mansion there were remarkably beautiful arrangements of flowers and other plant materials, all of which were grown in the garden. One plant that was extensively used in the arrangements was *Cornus mas* in full bloom. Eventually I did track down the one enormous plant of *Cornus mas* which was mostly hidden behind evergreen trees in the cutting garden. This plant could only be described as a multi-trunked tree, so large were its proportions. At each node on its branches there was a cluster of tiny ethereal bright yellow blooms. The entire tree was completely covered with these tiny yellow "powder puffs". This tree is the most outstanding specimen of *Cornus mas* that I have ever seen. It must have been twenty-five feet tall and nearly globular in shape.

Now to the Magnoliaceae: Along the gravel walk that paralleled the main north-south axis of the mansion there were two lovely specimens of *Magnolia denudata* flowering with their pure white blooms. Near them was a beautiful specimen of *Michelia doltsopa* not yet in flower. The tree was

symmetrical and swept upward to a point. Had it been pruned to such symmetry? I could find no evidence of that.

As we entered the main courtyard of Filoli there was a specimen of *M. campbellii* on the right. It had bloomed earlier and its flowers had been totally blackened by a severe frost approximately two weeks before our visit.

After touring the inside of the mansion itself and its many wondrous rooms and furnishings, we again found ourselves outside in the gardens. While walking along the walkway west of the house, I "broke ranks" when I spied a Magnolia up against the west side of the house with a beautiful pink bloom at eye level. This turned out to be the Clarke clone of the elusive *Magnolia dawsoniana*. August Kehr wrote me later that in retrospect that moment of seeing *M. dawsoniana* for the first time and at such close range was really the highlight of the entire trip for him.

### Strybing Arboretum

After lunch we toured the grounds of the fabulous Strybing Arboretum in Golden Gate Park in San Francisco. There were so many unusual plants to see. Did you miss as many of them as I did?

The Magnolias were in peak bloom for us in February 1989, which was a far cry from the situation we found when the Magnolia Society met in San Francisco twenty years earlier. At the earlier meeting, if my memory serves me correctly, there was only one single bloom on a *M. campbellii* var *alba* in all of Strybing Arboretum for that meeting! In the year 1989, the Magnolias did themselves proud. There were pink and also white *M. campbellii* in full bloom. *Magnolia sprengeri* var *diva* and *M. dawsoniana* were blooming side-by-side so that a

comparison between these two Magnolias could be assessed. Dick Figlar rightly pointed out that there must be some relationship between these two species. Both species had large, pink flowers with twelve tepals. The fragrance of the two, though distinctive, somehow seemed related, with that of *M. sprengeri diva* being the more pronounced of the two.

I did notice on more than one specimen of *M. sprengeri diva* that there were occasional, fully formed leaves on a few of the branches at the same time that the "precocious" flowers were blooming beautifully. I wondered if this were a seasonal thing, or if it occurred routinely. I found the leaves a bit distracting from the gorgeous show of pink blooms.

I was particularly interested to see the plant of *Magnolia sharpii* in the arboretum, as I had been on a field trip with Dr. Miranda and Dr. Sharp in the cloud forest of Chiapas, Mexico where this species grows wild. The specimen of *M. sharpii* is now about seven feet tall. The edges of the leaves were very slightly browned by the earlier freeze. I feel that this Magnolia should perform well in the San Francisco area. It is surely a distinctive and attractive Magnolia.

Not so distinctive is the way I would describe the *M. schiediana* that I saw at Strybing. It looked to me to be a rather inferior specimen of *M. grandiflora*, to which it is rather closely allied. Both species are hexaploids with 114 chromosomes. *Magnolia schiediana* does not have the rufous indumentum that is often seen on *M. grandiflora*. It lacks the winter hardiness of *M. grandiflora* as well; my plant failed to survive its first winter in Knoxville, Tennessee. I regard that as no great loss, however.

There was quite a large specimen of *M. delavayi* in Strybing. It has large, non-shiny evergreen leaves.





Flowers of *Michelia doltsopa*

I understand that its flowers are rather disappointing.

By walking up a steep path one could best view the huge flowers of *M. campbellii* 'Strybing White'. The outer eight tepals tend to be lax or a bit droopy. The tree as a whole was a beautiful sight in bloom with its pure white enormous blooms.

What else besides Magnolias were viewed in Strybing Arboretum? A first for me was to get to see the King Protea in bloom on its four foot shrub. That was a thrilling experience for me. A most unusual sight was to see an apparently "parasitic" cotoneaster growing out of the side of a huge tree trunk about eight feet off the ground. The cotoneaster was covered with bright red berries. Mr. Sigg, the leader of the group I was in, explained that some years ago a bird had apparently deposited the cotoneaster seed in a small cavity on the trunk where it germinated and grew. He further said that this tree trunk was assumed to be hollow, and, by this time, the cotoneaster had put down roots which had penetrated the soil line. In this way

the "parasitic" cotoneaster was dispelled.

I learned of the fine specimens of large-leaved Rhododendrons in flower while riding away from the arboretum in Dr. Frank Mossman's car. He and Mr. Howard Oliver were discussing them after seeing them. On a place as rich as the Strybing is in flora, one needs more time to stroll its several acres in order to get to see its many plant rarities.

I almost forgot to mention that I saw a tree of the evergreen Asiatic *Talauma hodgsoni* - a member of a genus very closely related to Magnolia.

Leaving one of the best trees for last, I now come to *Michelia doltsopa*. It is an evergreen, close relative of Magnolia. The several specimens of this *Michelia* in the Strybing Arboretum were of a more open character of growth than the earlier specimen seen at Filoli. The showy white flowers gave off a most pleasing perfume. Just for the heck of it I counted the tepals of a flower and found that there were twelve. In addition to the leaves and flowers of this lovely plant are the

showy flower buds which have a thick coating of bright, reddish-brown felting on their outer covering. Seeing *Michelia doltsopa* in bud and in flower was a long-standing wish, for me, come true. It is a marvelous tree. I wish I could grow it, but it fails the winter hardiness test. It is my hope that soon someone who flowers both *Michelia doltsopa* and the winter-hardy *Michelia compressa* will hybridize these two trees. This effort might result in at least a partially hardy *Michelia* hybrid with flowers larger than the rather insignificant ones of *Michelia compressa*.

### The Bay Area

Next, after being assured that Mrs. Victor (Carla) Reiter would welcome visitors to the the garden created by her late husband, we called at her home on Stanyan Avenue. She welcomed us heartily and showed us around the garden herself. An enormous pink Magnolia in full bloom completely dominated this hillside garden. This gorgeous specimen is a cross between *M. campbellii* var *mollicomata* and *M. campbellii* var *campbellii*. It was a wonder to behold. Also seen there was a smaller tree of *M. mollicomata* with beautiful pink flowers.

*Magnolia sargentiana robusta* 'Blood Moon' was blooming too. This reminds me that we saw the original specimen of 'Blood Moon' in flower at the Strybing Arboretum. The Strybing specimen of *M. sargentiana robusta* compared unfavorably with the incredible specimen we saw at Major Bolitho's home (Trenwainton) in Cornwall a few seasons back.

A fourth Magnolia specimen in Mrs. Reiter's garden in bloom was *M. campbellii* 'Stark's White'. This differs considerably from 'Strybing White' in that the outer eight tepals remain a bit cupped and do not droop below the

horizontal as does 'Strybing White'. Some people prefer the form of 'Stark's White' to that of 'Strybing White' even though the individual flower size of the former is not quite so large as that of the latter.

On Sunday following the meeting Harry and Irene Elkins, David Clulow and I rented a car and drove north ultimately to meet Mr. Marshall Olbrecht and visit his nursery of rare plants. At the convention it was mentioned that his Western Hills Nursery had suffered severe freeze damage only two weeks before, and we were somewhat dissuaded from visiting it. The four of us were, however, not to be deterred. I shall be eternally grateful to an Eastern acquaintance who recently told me not to miss this nursery if I were ever anywhere in its vicinity. Even though it would have been much better to see it without the freeze damage, it was nevertheless most rewarding to get to see so many rare plants in a relatively small area. Here I saw my first *Banksia* in flower. How it survived the freeze I do not know. Mr. Olbrecht graciously showed us his many "goodies". When I asked to buy a plant of the yellow-flowered *Sisyrinchium californicum*, he, not having any salable pots of this plant, went into his propagation house, pulled three plants out of his propagating bench, potted them, and offered to give them to me! Of course I insisted on paying him and was delighted to get to try this species at home.

Among many other unusual plants we were shown a plant of *Emmenopterys henryi*-- approximately six feet tall -- of quite a good size for a so recently available flowering tree from China.■

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*The editor wishes to thank Dr. Galyon for contributing the first of a proposed series of guest reviews of convention activities.*