

Sub Polar Magnolias

By Richard Aubert

So you really think you can't grow these exotic small trees in Ottawa's brutal climate. Aren't we supposed to be the second coldest Capitol after some obscure city in northern Mongolia? Worse than Moscow!!

Well thanks to those persistent plant breeders, who I guess, keep feeling sorry for us northerners, there are many new magnolias to choose from. There is a lot of breeding going on to find hardier varieties of many southern plants. They have added a few zones of hardiness to things like gardenias and camellias already. As for magnolia breeding, there are now a few zone 4 types and many for zone 5.

What is so spectacular about them is that many bloom before the leaves appear. Just when you can't wait any longer for that spring green after all that winter brown, out pop these great big flowers the size of tulips from bare magnolia branches. What a show. The scent of most varieties is great, when you have a couple around the yard the aroma can be wonderful in early spring.

Every spring when my curbside trees bloom they literally stop traffic. Probably because they are still quite rare in northern gardens where many still believe they are not hardy. Remember a tree filled with flowers the size of tulips, not very common up here in the frozen north. The dog walkers always seem to gravitate to my street at that time of the year for a look as well. Magnolias usually emit quite an aroma, especially in the evening. Then a few weeks later the leaves appear as flowers fade. You often get a smaller re-blooming in fall as well, when temperatures cool down.

They are often not in bloom when we shop the garden centers in May, even though that's when they bloom here (so shop earlier). That's because most are grown on the west coast and there they bloom in March and April. Once they arrive in the east and establish, they bloom in our spring April and May. Magnolias may skip blooming the first spring after being planted till they are established one full year. A garden columnist was recently asked why a magnolia was not blooming but otherwise very healthy and full of buds. The answer given put the blame on site, insects and other factors. It was most probably a variety that is not "bud" hardy enough to get through the last few very cold winters we've had. There are very few pests that bother magnolias. The only ones I have, are hungry squirrels in spring, that eat the sweet, swelling flower buds just as they are about to bloom.

Magnolias prefer a loose, slightly acidic soil, but do just as fine in an alkaline soil. At planting time just be generous adding peat moss and maybe some sulphur to the soil. Then keep them well mulched all year. Always water any new tree well the first year to get it established. Magnolias generally produce flower buds in the fall for the upcoming spring. It is just a matter of choosing the right variety for your area, whose flower buds are hardy.

Don't worry though, once established they are very long lived and bloom more each year. In down town Ottawa (zone 5a-b) there are some old established trees of Magnolia Soulangiana or 'Pink Saucer' (an old variety) that are reaching 25 feet after many years. They bloom every year covered in large pink blooms. The last two winters have been colder, so those trees have not bloomed well due to bud kill. Those buds have to be hardier in a zone 5 than in a zone 7. There are many types whose flower buds are hardier for those brutal winters.

Try some of the following varieties for colder areas in zone 5 and 4.

For white flowers try;

- Mag. Stellata, this one is usually said to be the hardiest of all (zone 4). It is a small tree or big shrub to about ten feet. It blooms very early so is often missed in garden centers. It has white, scented blooms, with many petals as compared to the usual tulip shape. Named cultivars are 'Water Lily' and 'Royal Star'.
- Mag. Lennei, a larger tree to fifteen feet. Large white flowers with a pink center that blooms later.
- Mag. Merrill, large 5-6 inch, pure white flowers with a great perfume especially at night it seems.
- Mag. Sieboldii, a hardy species that is pure white with red stamens for contrast and blooms on and off all summer rather than just in spring. A small tree at only 10-12 feet tall.
- Mag. Wada's Memory, has large white blooms on a more columnar shaped tree, great for tight spaces. It also has a flush of burgandy foliage on new growth each year for added color.

For pink and purple varieties try;

- Mag. Leonard Messel, with pink stellata like blooms on a medium sized tree.
- Mag. Little Girls Series is a group of very hardy pink and purple flowered trees. They grow between ten and fifteen feet. All are scented and some also rebloom. Some names are Ann, Betty, Judy, Randy, Jane, Rikki, and Susan.
- Mag. Daybreak is a new cultivar, everyone is talking about, it has clear pink 10-inch blooms and is quite hardy.
- Mag. Stellata Jane Platt, another pink form of stellata with many petals in each flower.

If you like yellow, there are many new very hardy types to choose from. They are bred from a very hardy species (accuminata) and will usually grow into larger trees 15 to 25 ft. tall. With the introduction of this color into the pinks you are starting to see a range of peach and apricot colors that was not available before.

- Mag. Elizabeth, is a clear pale yellow, with large scented blooms.
- Mag. Hattie Carthan is a yellow flower with a green and pink center.
- Mag. Yellowbird has butter yellow blooms.
- Mag. Butterflies, has stellata shaped bright yellow blooms

- Mag. Coral Lake is a new cultivar that is coral pink, that new color range of yellow pinks.

So if your old Pink Saucer (*Soulangiana*) magnolia doesn't bloom every year or you just want something new, as a hardy yet exotic shrub, try one of these new cultivars. Just be prepared for some drive-by admirers in spring.