

Magnolia grandiflora Not Just Another Southern Beauty

Evergreens. A great group of plants to be enjoyed in the New Jersey garden during February. You quickly conjure up images of the wind whistling through the needles of Pines, Firs, and Spruces along with the rustling of Magnolias leaves. Magnolias you ask? Yes, the noble and majestic *Magnolia grandiflora*, the Southern Magnolia, is a neglected plant in the New Jersey landscape. Native to areas near the shore from Florida to North Carolina, and west to Texas, it is the state tree of Mississippi. The question now coming to mind is – can it be hardy? Many of the cultivars and seed grown plants are not, or at best defoliate. But, there are several selections that have proven very hardy, with ‘Edith Bogue’ and ‘Brackens Brown Beauty’ being two of the best.

‘Edith Bogue’ has seen more general use, since its introduction in 1961 when it was shipped as a seedling from Florida to the home of Miss. Edith A Bogue in Montclair, N J. It has a more open habit than ‘Brackens Brown Beauty’, growing to 35’ tall and wide. ‘Bracken Brown Beauty’ was introduced in 1987 and is a more dense plant, growing to 40’ tall and about 20’ wide. ‘Brackens Brown Beauty’ has proven hardy to –20 degrees F with minor leaf burn, and ‘Edith Bogue’ to –13 degrees F with similar damage.

What other merits do these Southern Magnolias have besides evergreen foliage to make them an asset to any NJ garden? Actually, one of the great merits is the foliage. Many seedlings of the plants, including the two hardy forms above, have extremely attractive, dark green and glossy foliage. What is more, the undersides of the leaf are often covered with a thick brown or rust colored coating of hairs, called indumentum. Aside from adding a textural quality, the ‘fuzz’ is also fun to touch! ‘Brackens Brown Beauty’ has attractive indumentum and, for those living in the Southern sections of NJ, ‘D.D. Blanchard’ has incredible rust colored hairs. On windy days, the foliage also clatters and rustles, providing an audible element. The downside to the foliage is leaf drop during the fall and winter. The leaves do not decompose rapidly and, to the unappreciative, can be considered messy.

The trees also have great flowers. These flowers were a symbol of the Confederate Army during the Civil War. The species epithet of *grandiflora*, as designated by Carl Linnaeus in 1759, refers to the large (*grand*) flowers (*flora*). The flowers open from May to August, with each lasting for about one day. On average, the flowers are 6-12 inches in diameter and have an intoxicatingly sweet, lemony fragrance that beats any perfume I have ever encountered! On a warm summers evening, the fragrance often lays heavy in the air, adding yet again another dimension to the garden.

Culturally, the plants are easy to grow. *Magnolia grandiflora* can grow in lightly shaded to full sun conditions. In some regions of the South, the plants can reach 100 feet tall and are the dominant canopy tree. In NJ, they are best sited in a location that is protected from harsh winds and late afternoon sun, which will often scald the leaves. They can withstand moist soils, but it should still drain well. Standing water equates to death. A pH that is slightly acidic (5.5 to 6.5) is best. The plants do have a very shallow root

system, and with some notable exceptions (Liriope in shade, Hypericum in the sun) it is difficult to grow plants beneath. Often it is best to allow the plant to be limbed to the ground.

In the garden, the plants can also be trained into hedges (the cultivar 'Little Gem' is ideal), espaliered, used for screening, or for specimen use. With its tolerance to pruning, great floral fragrance and beautiful foliage, this Magnolia should be on everyone's evergreen list for the February garden!