An Ancient Tree for Today's Garden

Gardeners will rarely admit that we have a favorite plant – we love them all! However, when pressed, even the most ardent of gardeners will admit that there is a group of plants that produces a truly warm and fuzzy feeling inside. For me, it is the genus Magnolia. My parents' home is surrounded by a number of various Magnolias and whether it is childhood memories, or just the tremendous variety and history to be found within this group, it never fails to elicit happy emotions!

One of the attractions certainly is the history. Magnolias are one of the most primitive flowering plants that still exist, with fossils dating back over 100 Million years! What makes it more interesting is that the bee, the insect typically associated with the business of pollination, is thought to have evolved around 80 or so million years ago. So what was and still remains the primary pollinator of most Magnolias? Beetles! Magnolia flowers lack nectaries, but do produce sweet sugary excretions and the pollen is abundant and high in protein. Since the beetle has rather poor table manners and wallows around in the anthers as it dines, its body becomes coated with pollen, which it then transfers to the stigmas of the subsequent flowers!

Magnolia was named in honor of Pierre Magnol (June 8, 1638-May 21, 1715) by the French botanist Charles Plumier and so documented by Carl Linnaeus. Monsieur Magnol was a physician and a Director of the Royal Botanic Garden at Montpellier. He also developed the premise that plants should be classified by similar morphological features and divided into Families. A concept that is still a backbone of modern plant classification.

Beyond the history is the mesmerizing amount of variation that lie within this genus. For the early spring garden, there is the shrubby *Magnolia kobus* var. *stellata*, the Star Magnolia. Flowers of Star Magnolia are very fragrant, with up to 33 long and narrow white 'tepals' per flower. Since the sepals and petals of Magnolias look identical, they are called tepals. Straight *Magnolia kobus* is a much larger growing plant. The plant at Rutgers Gardens is 40' tall by 75' wide! The flowers are neither as fragrant nor as precocious as the Star Magnolia. However, its grand stature more than compensates for the lack of bloom! *Magnolia denudata*, the Yulan Magnolia also has fragrant, early blooming white flowers, with thick and fleshy tepals. The clean white tepals of Yulan Magnolia have long symbolized purity in China, with Buddhist Monks frequently planting it outside of temples. If pink tepals are more your fancy, *Magnolia kobus* var. *loebneri* 'Leonard Messel' is a great plant. Growing to 20', it is a cross between the *Magnolia stellata* 'Rosea' and *Magnolia kobus*, it produces abundant fragrant flowers that are dark pink outside and blushed white inside.

Another great early blooming pink form and undoubtedly the best known in New Jersey gardens is *Magnolia x soulangiana*, the Saucer Magnolia. First conducted by Monsieur Etienne Soulange-Bodin in 1820, Saucer Magnolia is a cross between *Magnolia denudata* and *Magnolia liliflora*. The flowers are typically white on the inside and pink streaked on the outside. However, since this cross has been frequently replicated, there are well

over 40 cultivars and color variations available. The single problem with early blooming forms is the susceptibility to damage from a late frost. There is nothing quite so disheartening then to awaken and see those beautiful flowers reduced to a brown mush!

Although all of the early blooming Magnolias absolutely flourish in full sun, they are also amazingly tolerant of light shade. The quantity of bloom is reduced proportionate to the amount of shade, but they often look stunning planted along the edge of a woodland garden. Combined with early Rhododendrons, perennials and bulbs, they form the anchor to the planting scheme – certain to make any gardener warm and fuzzy on a cool spring day!