

Magnolias at Bay Mobile 1995

Dalton Durio

I had originally planned to write that there were magnolias blooming all over the place and that the only reason I didn't have pictures to prove it was because my camera was broken. Guess what? My camera was broken, and most of the pictures that I took did not come out. Therefore, you must rely on my descriptions that follow to imagine what was to be seen in Mobile.

Ah, yes, images in my mind of the meeting in Mobile ten years ago left my mouth watering for what was to be seen this time. As we left Opelousas for Mobile, nothing prepared us for what was to happen weatherwise the morning after. With the temperature having plummeted to 20° Fahrenheit, all hopes of seeing magnolias in their full glory were severely dampened. After breakfast, a group of fellow magnolia enthusiasts (Joe Hickman, Bob Adams, Augie Kehr, Gordon Hagen and John Giordano) let us accompany them for an early morning, pre-meeting tour.

The first stop on our tour was Overlook Nurseries. Many members will recognize the surname of the Sawadas who own the nursery. Talk with the owners (Tom and Stephan Sawada) covered the past, present and future of Overlook Nurseries and magnolias at Overlook Nurseries. Unfortunately, all of the magnolias that were once there are now gone to make way for progress (i.e. highway construction). Some information was exchanged as to the origin of *Magnolia denudata* 'Sawada's Cream.' There is some speculation that it may actually be a hybrid between *Magnolia denudata* and *Magnolia acuminata* var. *subcordata*, thus explaining the cream colored flowers. There was also talk about *Magnolia* 'Sawada's Pink,' but this left much to be desired as it appears that this plant, which was used by Phil Savage in some of his crosses, has been lost forever.

Another unfortunate situation, albeit far too common, is the current status of magnolias at Overlook Nurseries. Financial reality has caused the nursery to switch over to the propagation of more common plants as opposed to the rare plants and hybrids that were grown before. Mr. Sawada's grandson, Stephan, stated that "regardless of how much the grower likes a plant, it is

impractical to propagate it unless it can be sold." I know from personal experience that this is far too true.

Yet there is a bright future at Overlook Nurseries and with the nursery business in general. As the public becomes better educated they will request better plants, including magnolias, from their local nurserymen. As this demand increases, it will not only be the love of a plant that makes a nurseryman grow it but also the financial benefit that he will receive for supplying it to his customers.

We then proceeded to tour the nursery. As stated before, magnolias were not to be a highlight here although some of the more common cultivars were being propagated. My father particularly liked seeing cultivars of *Acer palmatum* and *Pieris japonica* that appeared to be well suited to the Deep South climate. There were also some fine specimen *Quercus acuta* planted near the office building.

Our next stop was Dodd and Dodd Nurseries. This seems to be a collaborative effort between Tom Dodd, Jr. and Tom Dodd, III. Although the younger Dodd professes to be a "native nut," we caught him putting some Korean native plants into larger containers. This proves that even the toughest "nut" can be cracked with the proper tools—ornamental plants such as magnolias.

After a brief tour of his nursery, we went on to tour the magnolia plantings at Tom Dodd Nurseries. This is where the true effects of 20°F temperatures were to be seen on the magnolia blossoms. Row after row of Gresham hybrids with nothing but brown flowers. Truly unfortunate!

Here we saw a fine grouping of the ornamental evergreen, *Lithocarpus henryi* that were quite striking. These were about 40 feet tall and had glossy leaves up to 12 inches long and produced 3/4 inch, acorn-like nuts. Another plant that was very nice was an excellent specimen of *Ilex latifolia*. From a distance, this plant resembled a super compact *Magnolia grandiflora*. The leaves were glossy and dark green. Speaking of *Magnolia grandiflora*, there were large plantings of several choice cultivars including 'Satin Leaf,' 'Saint Mary,' 'Santa Cruz,' 'Edith Bogue,' 'Jubilee' and 'Doctor Orr' ('Satin Leaf' x 'Charles Dickens').

There were also several seedling selections from a tree in Griffin, Georgia that were viewed and speculated upon. Some say that these are interspecific hybrids between *Magnolia grandiflora* and *Magnolia virginiana*. I don't know if this is correct, but it is certainly possible. In any case, they are nice plants. Two that



*Above: Nature planted Magnolia virginiana var. australis at Bellingrath Garden.
Below: Ken Durio descends the moon bridge at the Japanese garden at
Bellingrath. Magnolia grandiflora frames the bridge.*



impressed me were 'Griffin' and 'Riegel.'

'Griffin' is different from its siblings with pale green leaves that are long and narrow. These leaves are extremely pointed for either *Magnolia grandiflora* or *Magnolia virginiana*. 'Riegel' is a compact, dwarfer form than typical and has potential for use in place of 'Little Gem.' It is not as fastigate as 'Little Gem' and has a denser growth habit. Both of these characteristics make it a better plant in my opinion although the foliage is not as dark green nor is the indumentum as nice as on 'Little Gem.' However, the flowers are supposed to be much larger.

The following morning, the meeting attendees boarded two buses and headed for Bellingrath Gardens. Immediately upon leaving the welcome center through the back doors what did I see but a magnolia in bloom. It wasn't much, but it was the first magnolia I saw on the trip. It was probably a cultivar of *Magnolia x soulangiana*.

There are many fine plants to see at Bellingrath. In various parts of the garden were plantings of different bamboos. The giant running types were mostly *Phyllostachys* species and cultivars and the smaller clumping types were *Bambusa* species and cultivars. These were especially prevalent in the Japanese garden where they also had a simulated pipe made of bamboo with water pouring out the end into a large container.

All around the gardens were large live oaks (*Quercus virginiana*) with Spanish moss hanging from the ends of their majestic branches. Underneath these and other large trees were plantings of Oregon grape hollies (*Mahonia bealei*) and Japanese coral berry (*Ardisia crenata*). The yellow flowers of the mahonia contrasted nicely with the bright red berries of the ardisia, and both served to brighten up these shady areas. In other shady spots, camellias (both *Camellia japonica* and *Camellia sasanqua*) were found in bloom along with Japanese laurels (*Aucuba japonica*) with their spectacularly colorful foliage.

The various holly species and cultivars around the gardens were covered with bright red berries. Most impressive were the weeping yaupons (*Ilex vomitoria* 'Folsom's Weeping'). These were about 15 feet tall with a very pendulous habit and many tiny, nearly translucent, red berries. It would be hard to beat the Chinese hollies (*Ilex cornuta*) with their glossy, dark green foliage that made a perfect background for the bright red berries which were in abundance on each plant. Surprisingly, they also had several specimens of English holly (*Ilex aquifolium*).

Other plants around the gardens included Taiwan flowering



Unnamed Gresham hybrid at Tom Dodd Nurseries, Semmes, Alabama.

cherries (*Prunus campanulata*) completely covered with their bright claret flowers. The flowering dogwoods (*Cornus florida*) were spectacular as usual. In various nooks and crannies plantings of heavenly bamboo (*Nandina domestica*) and lily of the valley shrubs (*Pieris japonica*) were to be found. The nandina were loaded with bright red berries, and the pieris were likewise loaded with attractive white flowers.

In addition to many lovely plants within the gardens, Bellingrath has outstanding water features throughout. Because it is situated near the Gulf of Mexico and alongside a river, this seems only natural, and most of the water features were indeed natural in appearance. It proved to be a delight to walk around just to see how water fit into the landscape from every vantage point.

Of course, no water feature is complete without plants and Bellingrath covered this requirement well. Around most water features were plantings of bald cypress (*Taxodium distichum* var. *distichum*). There large, deciduous conifers are most attractive during the winter and spring when their buttressed trunks and "knees" are clearly visible. A very similar plant, dawn redwood (*Metasequoia glyptostobes*), was also planted nearby. It, however, has no "knees." Several swamp red maples (*Acer rubrum* var. *drummondii*) were planted about and were quite showy with their bright red samaras. Smaller plants around the water features included water cannas (*Thalia geniculata*) and rice paper plants (*Tetrapanax papyrifera*) with their tropical looking foliage.

There was a fine rose garden with many roses in bloom as well as a small conservatory. Within the conservatory, one found many different amaryllis (*Hippeastrum*) in bloom as well as several cultivars of croton (*Codiaeum variegatum*) with their intensely colorful foliage in various forms. There was also a magnificent specimen of bird of paradise (*Strelitzia reginae*) in bloom.

In addition, there were several artistic uses of plant images in the garden. Two of the most showy were found in the Japanese garden. One involved the use of a palm-like image cut out of each section of a metal fence. The most impressive was the use of Japanese aralia (*Fatsia japonica*) leaves to make impressions on stepping stones. Apparently these leaves were pressed into the cement stepping stones before they dried and left a permanent imprint.

From Bellingrath, we went to Dodd and Dodd Nurseries and the planting grounds of Tom Dodd Nurseries. These were both



Towering Magnolia virginiana var. australis at Bellingrath Gardens.

described earlier in this narrative.

After our box lunch, we took a bus tour of Tom Dodd Nurseries. This enormous operation covers many acres and is truly a sight to behold. I can recall my first trip there. Albert, my brother, and I had spent the night in Mobile and planned to go to the nursery in the morning. Well, as usually happens when away from home, we didn't sleep well and were up and about at 4 o'clock in the morning. We decided to drive around looking for Tom Dodd Nurseries. He drove as I looked at a map to figure out where we were. Just as we came to the point where I thought Tom Dodd Nurseries should be, we were crossing a bridge with a large "lake" on one side. Since no lake was indicated on the map, I was puzzled. Come to find out, the lake was actually many, many plastic greenhouses reflecting moonlight just like water does.

Tom Dodd Nurseries has a very extensive selection of plant material. It is obvious upon viewing this collection that Tom Dodd, Jr. is not only a nurseryman but a true plantsman in every sense of the word. He has spent countless hours collecting, selecting and hybridizing plants. Those that meet his criteria are then propagated for distribution to nurseries throughout the Gulf Coast and beyond.

In addition to a large selection of magnolias, Tom Dodd Nurseries has fine collections of hollies, camellias and azaleas. These are some of the best collections of these genera in the country and many were either discovered or hybridized by Tom Dodd, Jr. himself. He has also roamed the neighboring country looking for distinct varieties of native plants and has introduced several exciting clones to the plant world. For this we are very thankful. His collecting also continues abroad through friends that have plant collections around the world. If you are ever invited to tour the nursery, please don't pass up the opportunity for it is truly a pleasurable experience for those who like plants.

From there, we went on to Magnolia Nursery. The entranceway was planted with cypress (*Taxodium distichum*), crepe myrtles (*Lagerstroemia*), bull bays (*Magnolia grandiflora*) and big leaf magnolias (*Magnolia macrophylla* var. *ashei*). Along the drive to the nursery were many tulip trees (*Liriodendron tulipifera*), hollies, running bamboos and gum trees (*Liquidambar styraciflua*). These plants were nice but not nearly as impressive as the personal plantings of John Allen Smith and his wife, Fran.

Unfortunately, daylight was running out, but before it came I hurried around to see what plant treasures I could find. There were so many exciting plants to view that I quit taking notes for



*Above: Along the Ilex cornuta lined path at Bellingrath Garden.
Below: Joe Hickman and Dorothy Callaway take a breather after lunch
at Tom Dodd Nurseries.*



my article at this time and just tried to absorb what I could. I was pleased to see some nice size specimens of *Michelia maudiae* and *Magnolia biondii*, although neither was in bloom at the time. There were also some fine palm specimens including a beautiful grouping of needle palms (*Rhapidophyllum hystrix*). Of course, bamboo figured prominently in the Smith garden with a colony of Henon bamboo (*Phyllostachys nigra* 'Henon') taking center stage. One plant that I hadn't thought much of before seeing it here was the Japanese sacred lily (*Rhodoleia japonica*). These were particularly effective when planted under large trees where little else seems to grow well.

The *coup de grâce* for a Cajun like myself was the seafood buffet generously provided by the Smiths to those in attendance. After spending a day stuffing my mind with as much plant knowledge as I could absorb, it was nice to stuff my belly with some very delicious food that made all the other meals eaten in Mobile seem quite inferior. A hats off thanks to the Smiths is in order. After this splendid meal, we again boarded the buses and returned to the hotel.

The following day was filled with very interesting talks by a host of speakers. Robert Hoffman [of Fairweather Gardens] started off with a talk about his personal magnolia favorites. Ken Tilt of Auburn University then gave an enlightening talk about new methods of growing magnolias in the nursery trade such as using them as Christmas trees. This is certainly a novel idea but a good one.

Augie Kehr talked about polyploid magnolias and brought up several interesting topics. One considers the future possibilities of more interspecific crosses that are apparently impossible now but may become possible as the chromosome numbers are manipulated. He showed the results of some of his work and, as usual, awed those with an interest in this area. His favorite polyploid hybrid seems to be 'Daybreak.' It is an upright growing tree that produces very fragrant, light rose-pink flowers late in the season. It is also very cold hardy and has reportedly bloomed without damage in Green Bay, Wisconsin after a minus 30°F freeze. It is a seedling of *M. Tina Durio*.'

It was quite a shock to find that Richard Schock (pun intended) was not in attendance. It was quite disappointing to find that his talk about magnolias with variegated foliage and other fancy leaf types was therefore canceled. I had looked forward to this very much, but hopefully he will be able to present it at some future meeting.

Gerald Taaffe and Glen Clark, both of Ottawa, Canada, taught this southern boy a thing or two about growing magnolias in USDA Zone 4a. This talk was of great benefit to us as mailorder nurserymen who have customers far beyond our own USDA zone range. The magnolias that have done well in Ottawa are *Magnolia fraseri*, *M. tripetala*, *M. hypoleuca*, *M. macrophylla*, *M. kobus* var. *borealis*, *M. kobus* var. *loebneri* 'Merrill,' *M. kobus* var. *stellata* (the cultivar 'Royal Star' has proven to be the most cold hardy of those they have tested), *M. salicifolia*, *M. x proctoriana*, *M. acuminata* and *M. sieboldii*. Those that have failed completely in Ottawa are *M. virginiana*, *M. grandiflora*, *M. campbellii*, *M. denudata*, *M. sargentiana* and *M. x veitchii*.

Barry Yinger then showed slides of magnolias and many other interesting plants that he has come across during his travels in Japan. It was amazing to see the diversity offered even in the supermarket nurseries of Japan. Their selection was much better than that found in many garden centers here in the states. There were also many specialty nurseries that he visited while there. These offered many plants unavailable here in the states and some unknown outside of Japan.

The final talk was given by John Fairey and Carl Schoenfeld. Lynn Lowery has done a lot to stimulate interest in the plants of Mexico, and his work has been followed up and expounded upon by this pair of plant explorers. Their expeditions into the Sierra Madre have added much to our knowledge of the plants of that region of Mexico. Included in this group is *Magnolia tamaulipana*. This relative of *Magnolia grandiflora* is hardy to 4°F and is quite showy. They have made a selection, 'Bronze Sentinel,' based on its bronze new foliage.

Other plants that were seen in the slides shown included: *Cornus florida* var. *urbiniana* 'Pringles Blush' (a pink flowered

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form of the Chinese lantern dogwood), *Penstemon* 'Mamulike Pink' (a pale pink flowered beardstongue), *Callirhoe involucrata* var. *tenuissima* (a pale pink flowered, evergreen perennial), *Fraxinus cuspidata* (an ash which resembles a fringe tree, *Chionanthus virginicus*, when in bloom), *Mascagnia lilacina* (a pink flowered butterfly vine), *Zephyranthes labufarosea* (a white flowered rainlily with pink margins and highlights), *Styrax glabrescens* var. *pilosus* (a snowbell with flowers which are twice the size and produced in twice the number of *Styrax grandiflora*), *Styrax youngae* (a larger flowered snowbell), *Pinus rudis* (a pine with blue-green, twisted foliage), *Oenothera macroscelus* (a very hardy, evergreen buttercup with yellow flowers), *Mahonia lanceolata* (an Oregon grape holly to 4 feet with a 20 inch panicle of cream flowers), *Allium coryi* (an onion with steel blue foliage and yellow-orange flowers), *Chiococcoa alba* (an evergreen with flowers which smell like those of *Osmanthus fragrans* and white berries in the winter), *Clethra pringlei* (an evergreen pepperbush with cinnamon scented, white flowers) and *Quercus germana* (a Mexican oak with a good color on spring growth).

The evening was completed with the annual auction. Lots of money was raised as well as a little hell as bidding became quite competitive. This is always a highlight of the annual meeting, and this year's was no exception.

The following morning, most members went on a field trip to see magnolias growing wild in southern Mississippi. Since I had seen these before, I took advantage of the time to make an early arrival back home in Louisiana. One reason I especially wanted to get back home was my newly acquired fiancée. We became engaged the week before I left, and she was quite eager for me to return as soon as possible. Next time I believe I will take her with me!

As you can tell, if you missed the meeting in Mobile, you missed out on a lot! And all of this without any real magnolia blossoms to look at. Had they not been held at bay by the freeze, just think of what you would have missed then. Next time, be there! ❀