

Magnolias 'Briar' and 'Barbara Cook'

Alleyne Cook

Precocious southeastern Asiatic tree magnolias cannot be rivaled for sheer mass of flower in early spring. The monarchs of these early bloomers, however, are the Asiatic *Magnolia campbellii* (along with its variety *mollicomata*), *M. sprengeri* var. *diva*, *M. dawsoniana* and *M. sargentiana* var. *robusta*. These great tree species grow with remarkable vigor and are suitable for growing in large spaces, not small gardens, and only in areas as mild as Vancouver, B. C.

In my own garden in 1996 all four of my Asiatic magnolias were a mass of flowers. These were *M. sargentiana* var. *robusta* 'Briar,' *Magnolia dawsoniana* 'Barbara Cook,' *M. sprengeri* var. *diva* and the hybrid *Magnolia* 'Charles Raffill.' The latter is the first of the season to flower and the best. This year, 1997, the last mentioned will be floriferous, the other three will be resting.

Of the Asiatics, *Magnolia sprengeri* var. *diva* has a visible flower color that is deeper than the others of this group. I say *visible* because the deepest color is on the outside. In the species *M. campbellii* and *Magnolia sprengeri* var. *diva*, the flowers face upwards. This is in contrast to those of *Magnolia sargentiana* var. *robusta* and *Magnolia dawsoniana* that, upon opening, turn and face downward. While *Magnolia sargentiana* var. *robusta* has a larger flower than *Magnolia dawsoniana*, both rotate their opening flowers making the ultimate color determined largely by the inside of the tepals. 'Diva' also flowers at an earlier age than the others, which can take years to bloom.

Yet, it was probably unfortunate that the first known tree of *Magnolia sargentiana* var. *robusta* to flower in the Vancouver, B.C. region did so

just outside our back door. Having waited seventeen years, eleven huge buds finally developed into flowers, the size and color of which were greater than we had ever seen in a temperate-climate tree.

This tree had been given to us by Mrs. Renton of North Bend, Washington in 1962 as a rooted cutting. She had obtained her original plant, as a rooted cutting, from the magnificent specimen of this species in the Washington Park Arboretum in Seattle. Our plant had grown above a seven foot fence, when, during one winter the entire current season's growth was killed. That winter, strangely, was no colder than most; it may have been that this growth had not hardened off properly and was still quite soft. That was the only time I have known this species to be damaged.

It was during its second flowering that reality arrived. A friend asked why we were covering our tree with pink Kleenex tissues. Later, another asked if we were amusing ourselves by throwing pink toilet paper over the tree. We quickly grew tired of those large flowers that rapidly became limp and were immediately stained with brown splotches. In fact, shortly after opening its flowers, this species, when viewed up close, became a pathetic disfigured mess. We were not sorry when the tree departed to the newly created Van Dusen Botanical Gardens, for it truly required greater space. Having said these unkind words about this species let us say that when viewed from a distance, as at Van Dusen, it is transformed from a monstrosity into the most glorious tree in existence. Never was a statement truer than "distance lends enchantment to the eye." Its defects and blemishes are transformed into a picture of breath-taking beauty. There is no tree grown that can compare to a mature specimen of *Magnolia sargentiana* var. *robusta* during the days of March and April.

I believe it was in 1964 that, on a visit to California, we stopped in Fort Bragg to visit Dr. Paul Bowman. Dr. Bowman owned the local hospital and his duties and responsibilities prevented him from travelling. His horticultural insight was widened through many contacts with visitors and supplemented by the only complete collection of *Curtis Botanical Magazine* I had ever seen. His garden con-

tained species and genera that I had seen nowhere in North America. Especially fine was his collection of the exotic magnolias.

When we departed, it was with a considerable number of seedlings and from these came some very interesting plants. One was *Magnolia sargentiana* var. *robusta* 'Briar.' It was certainly because of our initial adverse reaction to the plant, that *M.* 'Briar' was to lead such a wandering life. After at least four moves, with a setback on each occasion, this clone finally came to rest in the Ted and Mary Greig Rhododendron Garden in Stanley Park, Vancouver, from whence it was named after my daughter and registered. After some time it too finally set flower buds and at the appropriate time these started to open. Then suddenly, the weather turned cold and all the buds remained colored for three weeks without developing further. When they finally opened the color was a wishy-washy pink, as unattractive a shade as could be imagined. We now know that when the season is normal the flowers open as glorious as any of that species. This clone is not named because of the flower but because of the curious tubular or cornucopia shape of the new leaves as they emerge. After various contortions over three months they eventually become normal leaves.

Magnolia 'Briar'

Note the curious tubular shape of the newly emerged leaves held in the author's hand



Photograph by the author

The quantity of flowers on magnolias depends entirely on the exposure to sunlight. *Magnolia* 'Briar' was located in a flower bed, which meanders along the No. 13 fairway of the Stanley Park pitch and putt (now part of the Ted and Mary Greig Rhododendron Garden).

Directly in front of *M.* 'Briar' was a large conifer shading it during the morning hours. When this was removed total coverage of flowers followed. It would appear that the very large *Magnolia kobus* to the south and another *Magnolia sargentiana* var. *robusta* to the west, had little effect on flowering of *M.* 'Briar.' It was obviously the morning sun that caused the bud set. (See the following story for an historical tidbit on *M. kobus* in Vancouver, B. C.)

The first known specimen of *Magnolia dawsoniana* grown in Vancouver was the specimen given to the Ted and Mary Greig Garden by Ellen Hailey. In 1956 it had been purchased from Clarke's of San Jose as a six foot plant. When transplanted to its new site in 1969 it had grown to about 20 feet. It is now over 59 feet. The flowers are pale and correspond closely to the illustration in *Asiatic Magnolias in Cultivation* by G.H. Johnstone.

From the same lot of seedlings given to us by Dr. Paul Bowman came *Magnolia dawsoniana* 'Barbara Cook.' When it first flowered we realized that the color was vastly superior to the illustration of that same species in Johnstone's book. The greater fullness of the flowers is due to the much wider petals. It was so good that at first we considered it to be a hybrid. Vancouver is at the far end of the horticultural world and what might be horticulturally outstanding locally may very well be quite ordinary internationally. In those days it was customary that a young man who had completed a four year apprenticeship with us at the Vancouver Parks Board would be sent to the Royal Gardens at Windsor Great Park to work for 1-2 years under John Bond. Each apprentice left with specific instructions to try and find a better form of *Magnolia dawsoniana*. They never succeeded. We appeared to have a unique clone.

About 1983, the Cook collection of magnolias was moved to Van Dusen Botanical Gardens. There were three exceptions: *Magnolia* ×

veitchii, a hybrid of *M. campbellii* × *M. denudata*; *M.* 'Kewensis,' a hybrid of *M. kobus* × *M. salicifolia* (a small tree with white flowers); and *M. sargentiana* var. *robusta* 'Briar.' The move was successful with the exception of *M. dawsoniana* 'Barbara Cook.' This original plant died to its base and remained dormant for five years. Then up came a vigorous shoot that has since developed into a fine new tree.

In the meantime, the University of British Columbia (U.B.C.) had propagated the plant and was growing it under the name *M. dawsoniana* 'Cook.' When no superior clone was to be found they decided to name it after my wife, Barbara Cook. Eventually, those few *M. dawsoniana* 'Barbara Cook' that became saleable were distributed to various nurseries. Thirteen of these were purchased by Roy Forster and planted in the newly created Sino-Himalayan Garden at Van Dusen Gardens. (This garden had been created during the previous two winters when I moved, without permission, 3,000 rhododendrons from Stanley Park to Van Dusen, an operation of which I am very proud. Only with a totally inefficient management could it have been accomplished. It is sometimes better to ask forgiveness than to ask permission.)

At the Ted and Mary Greig Rhododendron Garden our method of increasing our magnolia stock was somewhat different than at nurseries or U.B.C.; it was by vertical division. (I would suggest that this method be used only on someone else's plants, never on your own.) We had a five foot plant of *M.* 'Barbara Cook' with a two foot side shoot. By cutting into the trunk behind the shoot and continuing down until the cut was below root level we had a new plant. Two years later, having determined our method was successful, we again approached the unfortunate *M. dawsoniana* 'Barbara Cook.' It forked at about three feet from the ground. We sawed it vertically in half finishing with two fragile slivers.

It was these three magnolias that showed us the effect of light on the flowering age of our plants. The first planted in the open took six years to bloom. The second, shaded principally by a large *Acer*



Magnolia 'Barbara Cook'
Photograph by the author

macrophyllum, took twelve years. (It may very well have taken longer, but I was in need of winter firewood.) The third, surrounded on all sides by tall trees, took sixteen years.

The naming of *Magnolia* 'Briar' and *Magnolia* 'Barbara Cook' was done after long deliberation. Duncan and Davies, the famous New Zealand Nursery, has put them into production but so far there is no sign of their names appearing in their catalog. Anyone else in North America who wishes scions can write to the Vancouver Parks, Briggs Nursery of Olympia, Washington also was impressed and took scion wood. ☞

Alleyne Cook was born in New Zealand and as a young man moved to England to work at Sunningdale Nursery. There he moved many of the original rhododendron species grown from wild-collected seed by the famous plant hunters from the garden of the Stevenson's—Tower Court to Windsor Great Park. In the late 50s he moved to N. Vancouver and became head gardener at the Ted and Mary Grieg Rhododendron Garden at Stanley Park.

Mr. Cook is recognized for his magnolia endeavors in the Vancouver B. C. area, but is also well-known in the rhododendron world. The American Rhododendron Society recently presented him with the Gold Medal for his international contribution to the genus Rhododendron.

Now retired, he and his wife Barbara are ardent plantspeople and travel widely.