

Philip J. Savage, Jr.

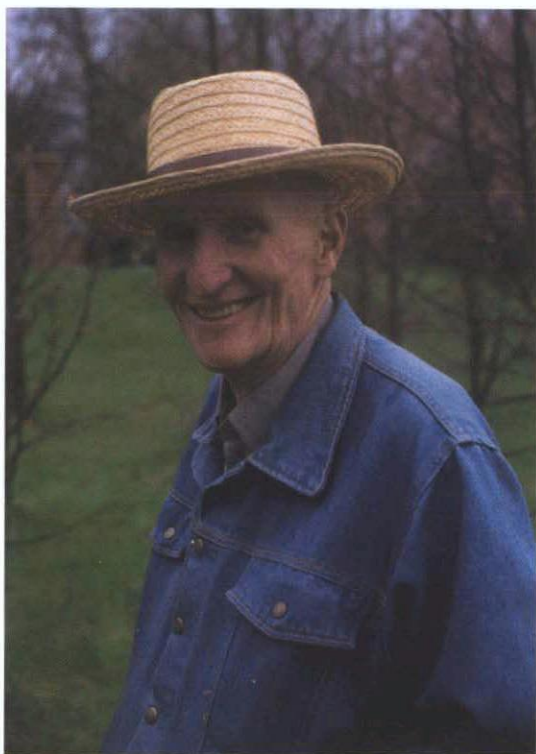
May 8, 1917—October 13, 2002

Phil Savage, Jr., an icon in the Magnolia world, passed away last October of complications from the West Nile virus. Phil, a renowned magnolia hybridizer, specialized in breeding magnolias that were cold hardy. Because of this, magnolia enthusiasts living in colder climates now have many more choices than did Dennis Ledvina when he bought his house in Green Bay, Wisconsin in the late 1970s. Phil has left an enduring legacy with the many fine, cold-hardy hybrids he bred. Following are several reminiscences from individuals who were deeply influenced by Phil and his work with magnolias.

DENNIS LEDVINA WRITES...

Back in the late 70s the landscaping around my new house consisted of three magnolias: two *M. × soulangeana*, and a *M. × loebneri* 'Merrill.' At the time, these were the only magnolias generally available at local nurseries. As I watched these magnolias bloom each spring, I became more intrigued with their beautiful flowers and began driving around Green Bay to observe and admire some of the established trees. My admiration for the genus continued to grow each year as I began collecting more information about these magnificent plants.

One summer I was in the Detroit area and I decided to call this magnolia expert, Phil Savage, that I had read so much about. I can vividly remember calling Phil from a telephone booth on Telegraph Road and finding myself, an unknown amateur, talking to a magnolia expert who from the first made me feel like a lifelong friend. Phil immediately invited me to his seven-acre sanctuary and we observed and discussed magnolias for many hours. I left that day with bundles of scion wood that would soon test my grafting skills. This was the start of over twenty years of mentoring and



Phil Savage Jr. in his garden (photo by Roy Klehm)



M. 'Goldfinch' (photo by Roy Klehm)

in full bloom, and then to Vancouver's Stanley Park to see *M. sprengeri* 'Diva' in peak bloom, followed by a visit and tour with Chuck Tubesing, who was then at the University of British Columbia Arboretum. In 1988, Phil hosted the Magnolia Society meeting with a picture perfect bloom on his seven-acre oasis of beauty. The event was perfectly hosted and cumulated with the celebration of his 71ST birthday.

One of the memorable events of the 1989 Magnolia Society meeting in San Francisco was my flight cancellation and rerouting that added five hours to my trip. At 3AM, I arrived at the hotel and there was Phil lying in bed wide-awake and concerned about where I had been all night. The following day I experienced my first directors' meeting with Phil demonstrating to the directors, and mentoring to me his management expertise.

For members and readers of *Magnolia*, the journal of the Magnolia Society, Phil is a legend. During the course of the existence of the Magnolia Society, Phil held all offices, including editor. His knowledge of Magnoliaceae and his willingness and sophistication in sharing this knowledge tend to overshadow his contributions to hybridization. Phil was instrumental in the formation of our Society and helped ensure that our Society survived its fragile beginnings, such as lack of suitable material for publication in the newsletter. In the article "Coming of Age,"¹ John M. Fogg Jr. wrote:

In the second issue of our newsletter, which appeared in April, 1965, you were informed that our Treasury was in a fairly satisfactory condition, but that we would be unable to publish another number until such time as our members submitted articles of real interest and value. My comments in that issue contained what I considered an impassioned plea for material, which would enable us to come out with newsletter number three, before the end of 1965. For many months it seemed as though my request had fallen upon deaf ears, then, triggered by some unfathomable stimulus, the articles began to pour in. The top contributor has been Mr. Phil Savage of Bloomfield Hills, Michigan, the first half of whose excellent account of the Buergeria section is printed in this issue. The second half will be held over

camaraderie that transpired between us. In the subsequent years I would make the trip to Bloomfield Hills several times a year to observe the blooms, collect scion wood, collect seed in September, and just relax and discuss magnolias. Phil would always offer me residency in their apartment and his wife Tina would serve nourishing lunches and gourmet dinners.

Phil and I traveled the country together to attend Magnolia meetings, to visit with the magnolia populace, and to view various magnolia collections. One of the more memorable trips was to Seattle's Washington Park Arboretum to view *M. sargentiana* var. *robusta*

for the next number and, in the meantime, Phil has submitted enough additional material to keep us going for at least two or three years!

In another article, "The Meeting at Memphis,"² John Fogg, Jr. wrote:

The first meeting of the American Magnolia Society was held at the Goldsmith Civic Garden Center in Memphis, Tennessee.... Following the lunch hour, Mr. Phillip J. Savage, Jr. of Bloomfield Hills, Michigan, delivered a fascinating illustrated lecture entitled, "What's left in China?"

This was a comprehensive account of the natural distribution and taxonomic relationships of all the species of Magnolia known to occur in China. In a subsequent year, Phil wrote dozens of articles for the newsletter and later for *Magnolia*. These

articles exemplified Phil's vast knowledge of the habitat of the genus, and its ability to adapt to the harsh Great Lakes weather. Phil wrote articles about hybridizing techniques and updates on his achievements in this area.

One classic Phil Savage article was "The Goddess of Changyang Hsien,"³ that originally appeared in the newsletter and was reprinted in the journal several years later. This article discussed the natural distribution of *M. sprengeri* 'Diva' in China and the successful efforts of Ernest H. Wilson to bring it to England.

Phil had a natural talent for magnolia hybridizing which was always encountered by a goal and a vision. One of his goals was to combine the hardiness and prolonged dormancy of *M. acuminata* with the exotic, precocious, and very tender species of section *Yulania*. The seed parent was the famous *M. acuminata* 'Fertile Myrtle' and the pollen parents included *M. campbellii*, *M. denudata*, *M. sprengeri*, *M. sargentiana* var. *robusta*, *M. × soulangeana*, and *M. × veitchii*. Phil



M. 'Apricot Brandy' (photo by Roy Klehm)



Phil's garden (photo by Roy Klehm)

also was a pioneer in crossing *M. acuminata* with pollen from magnolias in section *Buergeria*, which resulted in the named hybrids 'Gold Star' and 'Maxine Merrill.' Phil's crosses among species in section *Rytidospermum* and sometimes with *M. × wieseneri* resulted in the named hybrids 'Fruit Cup,' 'Pink Nightie,' and 'Rosy Cheeks.'

Philip was a hero of World War II and built Turf and Horticultural Supplies in Taylor, a thriving business—but his heart belonged to the lovely magnolia tree. He devoted most of his 85 years to hybridizing the magnolia and eventually turned out magnolia 'Butterflies,' a bright yellow flowering tree that is sold throughout the world.

Mr. Savage was born in Detroit, grew up in the city, and graduated first in his class at Catholic Central High School. He also attended the University of Michigan and the University of Detroit.

Besides his wife Tina, survivors include five sons; Philip III, Peter, Timothy, Geoffrey and Brian; a daughter, Laura Saylor, and ten grandchildren.

Tina and I have an aspiration to continue Phil's legacy and ensure that his work will be preserved.

Following is a list of the named cultivars resulting from Phil's work. This list was constructed from memory and consequently might very well be incomplete.

'Apricot Brandy' (*M. acuminata* 'Fertile Myrtle' × *M. sprengeri* 'Diva'). This very floriferous magnolia has a flower that combines pink and yellow to form an overall peach color.

'Archangel' (*M. sprengeri* 'Diva' × *M. × soulangeana* 'Brozzoni'). A magnolia that displays huge, heavy textured, white flowers.



M. 'Butterflies' (photo by Roy Klehm)

- 'Barbara Nell' (*M. acuminata* 'Fertile Myrtle' × *M. sprengeri* 'Diva'). This cultivar is pyramidal in growth with an upright leader, resembling *M. acuminata*. The flowers are creamy white with an overlay of pink shading from the base of the tepal up the midrib.
- 'Big Dude' (*M. sprengeri* 'Diva' × *M. × soulangeana* 'Picture'). A magnolia with upright but spreading habit of growth, with very large flowers up to 4.75in (35cm) in diameter, 9-12 tepals, nodding, fragrant, rose pink outside, white within.
- 'Bloomfield.' A selection of *M. tripetala* with long and thick leaves and with flowers somewhat larger than average, often with extra tepals.
- 'Brigitta Flinck' and 'Karl Flinck' (*M. macrophylla* × *M. virginiana*). Vigorous, hardy clones with flowers intermediate between the parents.
- 'Butterflies' PP #7456 (*M. acuminata* 'Fertile Myrtle' × *M. denudata* 'Sawada's Cream'). This magnolia forms a neatly shaped tree with deep yellow, truly precocious flowers, ten to 14 tepals, with red stamens.
- 'Coral Reef' (*M. acuminata* 'Fertile Myrtle' × *M. sprengeri* 'Dark Diva'). This magnolia has marvelous coral pink flowers.
- 'Curly Head' (*M. acuminata* 'Fertile Myrtle' × *M. × veitchii* 'Peter Veitch'). A tall upright tree with dense habit, leaves have revolute edges, and the flowers are pastel pink and yellow on white.
- 'Elegance' (*M. sprengeri* 'Diva' × *M. kobus* var. *stellata* 'Waterlily'). This multitepaled magnolia has pure pink flowers.
- 'Fertile Myrtle.' An exceptional fecund seedling tree of *M. acuminata* that was raised from seed collected in northern Ohio.
- 'Fireglow' (*M. cylindrica* × *M. denudata* 'Sawada's Pink'). The flowers are small but well shaped; light pink with brilliant wax-like cerise spot at tepal base that is unfading.

- 'Flamingo' (*M. acuminata* 'Fertile Myrtle' × *M. sprengeri* 'Diva'). This magnolia forms a very symmetrical, pyramidal tree with dense foliage resembling the pollen parent. The flowers are brilliant, unfading flamingo pink, and are borne slightly before the leaves are produced.
- 'Fruit Cup' (*M. fraseri* × *M.* × *wieseneri*). A large, white-flowered magnolia whose fragrance permeates the entire yard.
- 'Gold Star' (*M. acuminata* var. *subcordata* 'Miss Honeybee' × *M. kobus* var. *stellata rubra*). This magnolia produces an upright-growing, small to medium-sized tree with bronze red unfurling foliage. The creamy yellow, star-like flowers are 3.9in (10cm) wide with 14 strap-shaped tepals.
- 'Goldfinch' (*M. acuminata* var. *subcordata* 'Miss Honeybee' × *M. denudata*). This very early flowering magnolia with light yellow flowers forms a tall and graceful tree.
- 'Gorgeous' (*M. acuminata* × *M. sargentiana* var. *robusta*). This hardy pink flowered magnolia has the color and form of its pollen parent.
- 'Helen Fogg' (*M. denudata* 'Sawada's Cream' × *M.* × *veitchii* 'Peter Veitch'). This magnolia produces white flowers with the lower half a clean pink.
- 'Laura Saylor' (*M. denudata* 'Sawada's Pink' × *M. sprengeri* 'Diva'). The flowers of this magnolia are large and upright, have 9-12 tepals that are bright pink outside, white shaded with pink inside, and do not open below horizontal.
- 'Lemonade.' This magnolia has very upright yellow flowers with slight chartreuse shading at the base.
- 'Limelight' (*M. acuminata* var. *subcordata* 'Miss Honeybee' × *M.* × *soulangeana* 'Alexandrina'). This magnolia is a sister seedling of *M.* 'Yellow Lantern' and has more chartreuse in its yellow flowers.
- 'Marj Gossler' (*M. denudata* × *M. sargentiana* var. *robusta*). This magnolia resembles *M.* × *veitchii* but has cold hardiness well below zero; well shaped flowers on excellent substance; 7-8 tepals, 4.75-6in (12-15cm) long, white inside, outside pink at base ascending to white.
- 'Mary Slankard' (open pollinated seedling of *M. sprengeri* 'Diva'). The flowers of this 'Diva'-like magnolia have 9 tepals, the bottom half of which are rich pink, the top half pure white.
- 'Maxine Merrill' (*M. acuminata* var. *subcordata* 'Miss Honeybee' × *M.* × *loebneri* 'Merrill'). This magnolia is reminiscent in form of *M.* × *loebneri* with starry bright yellow flowers with six tepals that are sturdy and not floppy.
- 'Peachy' (*M. acuminata* 'Fertile Myrtle' × *M. sprengeri* 'Diva'). The flowers are large, somewhat floppy, with a pleasant fragrance. The 9 tepals have an orange/red color on the outer surface and are creamy white on the inner surface.
- 'Pink Nightie' (*M. obovata* × *M. fraseri*). The flowers of this hybrid are tall and vase-shaped with pale pink tepals of a satiny texture; the fragrance is strong and very pleasant in early evening.
- 'Pink Royalty' (*M. acuminata* 'Fertile Myrtle' × *M. sprengeri* 'Dark Diva'). This very floriferous magnolia has up to 16 tepals, is a rich solid pink, and is very fragrant.
- 'Rosy Cheeks' (*M. obovata* × *M.* × *wieseneri*). The flower buds are pink, opening to flowers with eight inner tepals of white, and four outer tepals of rich pink,

stamens, and the powerful fragrance of *M. × wieseneri*.

'String of Pearls' (*M. denudata* × *M. cylindrica*). This magnolia has pure white flowers that are strung along the entire branch.

'Toro' (*M. acuminata* 'Fertile Myrtle' × *M. × soulangeana* 'Picture'). This magnolia is very vigorous growing with pinkish-yellow flowers. This cultivar is a grandparent of my excellent pink hybrid 'Rose Marie' and is proving to be an excellent gene pool for future hybridizing.

'Virginia Watson' (*M. virginiana* × *M. × wieseneri*). The flowers open to cup-shape with eight pure white tepals, bright crimson stamens, and has a strong, pleasant fragrance intermediate between the parents.

'Yellow Lantern' (*M. acuminata* var. *subcordata* 'Miss Honeybee' × *M. × soulangeana* 'Alexandrina').

Flowers are a clear, even lemon

yellow, without green striping; as large and long-lived as 'Alexandrina' and retaining the 'tulip' shape until they drop.

Many of these primary crosses have created a genetic pool that is valuable for successive generations in magnolia hybridizing. Many of the second and third generation crosses resulting from Phil's work will be flowering in the ensuing years.

Dennis Ledvina,
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KARL FLINK WRITES...

Fifty years ago my wife and I built a home in southern Sweden. The garden surrounding the house became a plantsman's garden. Ten years later, we moved to Switzerland, where I worked and where we lived for 40 years. We kept, however, our Swedish garden.

Magnolia Society members, Irene and Harry Elkins have for a very long time visited Sweden every year to see Irene's family. They heard about our garden and went there whilst we were in Switzerland. As a result, we went to visit them, for the first time, in Michigan nearly 40 years ago. Harry took me to see Phil Savage's place. This was for me a tremendous thing to happen. Bloomfield Hills was then the home for most hardy Magnolia species and some of their hybrids. Phil Savage, who had decided to concentrate on growing magnolias,



M. 'Maxine Merrill (photo by Roy Klehm)



Phil Savage, Jr. (top row, left) shown with his bomber crew.

was however, the most important factor during that visit. He made, in a quiet way, an impression of a complete, independent individual with an extraordinary ability to communicate his knowledge of magnolias. He enlisted me to become a member of the American Magnolia Society, of which he was then the Secretary, and gave me some old copies of *Magnolia* with his three articles titled "Magnolias in Michigan."

When I left Phil, I was a little depressed when I compared my own growing results with his, but also encouraged from the meeting with this wonderful person. I have, since this first meeting, visited Phil many times and always felt the same admiration for the man. He was a patriot and it was not by chance that he volunteered to join the Army Air Force during World War II. He wanted to see things from the top, which he did as an Air Force captain.

Phil was one of the two persons I most admired amongst hybridizers. (The other was the German farmer, Hobbie, who created many rhododendron hybrids.) Both of these men had flair; they seemed to have an instinct for knowing what material would be best for various crosses.

Phil used combinations that resulted in more than 50% of his crosses in tree hybrids. He used polyploid parents and with them, in some instances, aneuploids. From these results, he selected, with great skill, the best new plants.

In two specific instances, his flair was clear. He crossed *M. acuminata* with what he called *M. denudata* 'Sawada's Cream.' (I am convinced that there was *M. × soulangeana* blood in the *M. denudata*, which explains the deep yellow color of 'Butterflies.') The plants that Phil considered good, he generously shared with friends and reputable nurseries. Also, Phil's plant material that found its way to Sweden has played an important role in the development of magnolias growing there.

I consider the Magnolia Society to be one of the finest organizations of its kind. Phil, first as Secretary and then as President, was, to a great extent, behind this development.

Of the many magnolias that Phil developed, my favorites are: *M.* 'Karl Flinck' (white), *M.* 'Phil's Masterpiece' (pink), *M.* 'Butterflies' (yellow)

Although we have lost Phil, it is a consolation to have all this beauty he left behind.

Karl Flinck, Sweden 🌿

ROY KLEHM WRITES...

Phil Savage, Jr. ... the mellow, deep voice; the imposing, lean, and tall stature; the gentle manner; the all-encompassing knowledge of magnolias; the unassuming acceptance of hybridizing success; the other unusual hobbies and interests; the extensive trial and test garden; the time, effort, and willingness to share information, pollen, and plant scions; Buster, his faithful dog; Bill Knapp's for lunch (half sandwich with soup); Bronze leaf Baby Shoes; the peacocks.

The Magnolias: 'Butterflies,' 'Gold Star,' 'Goldfinch,' 'Lemonade,' 'Toro,' 'Big Dude,' 'Fertile Myrtle,' 'Apricot Brandy,' 'Laura Saylor,' 'Limelight,' 'Archangel,' 'Fireglow,' 'Maxine Merrill,' 'Yellow Lantern,' 'Flamingo,' 'Gorgeous,' and 'Pink Royalty.'

...and Tina—He always said, "a man should be so lucky."

...and Philip III, Peter, Timothy, Laura, Geoffrey, and Brian and ten grandchildren

We were all fortunate to be touched by Phil.

Phil, you left magnolia footprints on my soul.

Your friend,

Roy Klehm, South Barrington, Illinois 🌿

Footnotes

¹ *Newsletter of the American Magnolia Society*, Volume 3, Number 1, December 1967.

² *Newsletter of the American Magnolia Society*, Volume 5, Number 1, July, 1968.

³ *Magnolia*, journal of the American Magnolia Society, Volume xvi, Number 2, Fall-Winter 1980.