

Magnolias for the Heart

By Kim Smith

No group of trees and shrubs is more favorably known or more highly appreciated in gardens than magnolias, and no group produces larger or more abundant blossoms.”

~ Ernest “Chinese” Wilson, botanist and plant explorer

My love of magnolias grew from living in Boston. As an art student renting a tiny carriage house on Beacon Hill, I could ill afford to purchase flowers, and when I did splurge, a handful of marguerites exhausted my budget. I could, however, walk in the early morning along the Charles River and surreptitiously snip a blossom or two from the billowing magnolias blooming alongside the riverbanks. I'd hurry home, imagining the ensuing exchange of words if someone had seen me and inquired as to why I thought it was acceptable to help myself. Of course I didn't think it was acceptable, but the desire to have a magnolia blossom was greater than my sense of propriety. My little flat, despite its lack of floor space, had high ceilings and was light-filled and airy. I had furnished it almost entirely in shades of white (naively thinking this was all very original) with sheer, floor-to-ceiling diaphanous curtains that covered the enormous studio windows and French doors (former carriage entrance), ivory white tile floors, white-washed brick walls, and creamy white painted furniture. Every surface white, except for a set of 1920's bamboo chairs and table scavenged from my Grandmother's garden, which were left with their warm, natural patina. My treasures were floated in a wide, shallow footed crystal bowl, a cherished gift from my great aunt, and the lambent lavender-pink striations of the petals glowed, offset by the colorless surroundings .

When my husband and I were first married we rented an apartment at the corner of Commonwealth Avenue and Clarendon Street. The great bow front window of the living room first floor, with typical-for-brownstones twenty-foot ceilings, was at eye-level with, and surrounded by, a luxuriously lush and dense round-headed saucer magnolia (*Magnolia soulangiana*). Winter-weary Bostonians eagerly anticipate Commonwealth Avenue in bloom during magnolia time and we were fortunate to have an aged beauty planted in the center of the diminutive streetside garden. Usually flowering during the dreariest and dankest of weather, forever imprinted in my mind is the picture of gray-day city traffic, viewed through the sheen of rain splashed windows and an enveloping cloud of pale pink and magenta washed blossoms.

For our next home, we purchased a first floor corner-unit condominium on Massachusetts Avenue, and it too had elegantly high ceilings and a lovely bay window. Despite the lack of actual square footage, high ceilings and tall windows gave the illusion of light and air and space. We refurbished the handsome black wrought iron fence surrounding the buildings front lot and I volunteered to make the garden. I sorely missed the magnolias on Commonwealth Avenue and so we planted one of our own, sited center to the bay window. There was just enough space to plant one white and one red climbing rose bush at each corner, very striking I thought, against the black iron, along with a soupçon of seasonal stalwarts—tulips in the spring, summer annuals, and chrysanthemums in autumn. While tending our plot, passersby would stop to chat and admire this tiny garden, a little corner of cheer, in an otherwise cheerless neighborhood. The sweetest compliment came from a very elderly lady who recalled that when she was growing up everyone on Mass. Ave. had a front dooryard garden, replete with flowering trees and roses. I

gave her a bouquet of rose red and snow white roses and thought about how beautiful it must have been.

Today, in our postage stamp of a yard, we have tucked in four magnolias. The enclosed rear yard and borders running the length of the house create sheltered niches for the magnolias. *Magnolia* is a genus comprising approximately 210 species of flowering plants growing in eastern North America and southeastern Asia, and our four magnolias unintentionally reflect this rather scattered geographic distribution. The sweetbay magnolia (*Magnolia virginiana*) is found in its natural habitat as far north as Ravenswood Park in Gloucester, Massachusetts. The star magnolia (*Magnolia stellata*) is native to central Japan, where it is found growing wild on the slopes of Mt. Fujiama. The Oyama magnolia (*Magnolia sieboldii*) is native to southern Manchuria, Korea and southern Japan. Our *Magnolia* 'Elizabeth' is a cross between the American cucumbertree (*M. acuminata*) and the Chinese Yulan magnolia (*M. denudata*), inheriting many of the most outstanding qualities of both trees.

Next week's column will continue with the descriptions of different species and culture of magnolias. Photos of Magnolia 'Elizabeth,' courtesy of Liv (daughter), taken at the Arnold Arboretum last year in early May.



