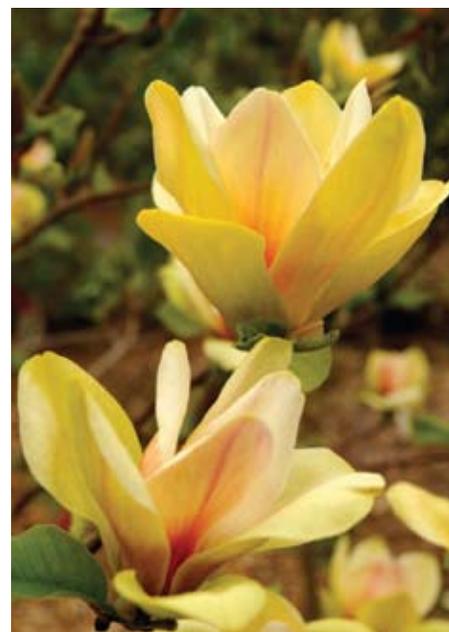


Genteel magnolias



This family of
much-loved
flowering trees is
teeming with
colorful characters

By Elizabeth Petersen

Magnolias add value and character to landscapes with their showy displays of gorgeous, fragrant flowers, elegant forms and reliably easy care.

Adding to their allure, magnolias present a huge assortment of options. There are deciduous and evergreen species. Some trees boast flowers with many delicate tepals, while others produce chalice-shaped flowers as big as 12 inches across. Blooms cover a broad

spectrum of dramatic colors and color combinations: yellow, pink, red, purple and white.

With more than 200 native *Magnolia* species and hundreds of hybrids, there would seem to be a perfect magnolia for every situation.

But finding the right magnolia for a particular situation can be downright daunting, according to Paul Reimer.

Reimer is president of Reimer's ▶

Top row: 'Galaxy', Yulan Magnolia, 'Sunsation'.
Bottom row: 'Butterflies', 'Black Tulip',
Magnolia macrophylla ssp. *ashei*.
PHOTOS COURTESY OF HERITAGE SEEDLINGS

Nurseries, a wholesale grower of woody ornamentals with locations in Chilliwack, British Columbia, Canada; and Lynden, Washington. He said that some experts categorize magnolias based on issues with hardiness and the timing of bloom. Others emphasize the importance of finding plants that bloom at an early age, so plants are more marketable sooner.

Some seek dark, saturated colors on slow-growing trees with smaller stature. Fragrance of the exquisite flowers counts, too. "Variety selection is tricky," Reimer said. "You have to grow what is suitable for your end customers."

Flirting with frost

Hardiness and the timing of frosts relative to bloom are big concerns for gardeners, especially in parts of the country such as the East Coast, where a



Spring Welcome® magnolia (*M. × loebneri* 'Ruth') is hardy in subzero temperatures and has pristine white flowers up to 4½ inches in diameter. PHOTO COURTESY OF HERITAGE SEEDLINGS

late frost after a series of warm days is not unheard of.

Many large-flowered, deciduous

hybrid magnolias bloom very early in the season — late winter to early spring — before foliage appears.

Popular with winter-weary gardeners who crave colorful, fragrant displays, magnolia blooms don't hold up well to frost, unfortunately. If the weather shifts suddenly from a warming trend, a sharp frost can wipe out the entire year's bloom, turning the expected flowers to mush.

The solution may be selecting magnolias that bloom later in the season — or it may not.

Alan Branhagen, director of horticulture at Powell Gardens in Kansas City, Missouri, manages part of the multi-site North American Plant Collections Consortium. The extensive collection of magnolias includes mainly hardy species, many cultivars and numerous hybrids on trial.

"There is some good in selecting delayed flowering on precocious bloomers, so they escape late frosts," Branhagen said. "But I have to say, I've seen many times when the early ones bloom through a warm spell only for the later ones to be frozen." That happened in Kansas City this year, he said.

His advice? "Sometimes, I just think consumers should buy the one that they personally find beautiful and leave it on the caveat that

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Magnolia color palette

An experts' guide

YELLOW — "'Judy Zuk' is one amazing hybrid, the yellowest yellow magnolia," Eric Hammond of Heritage Seedlings said. He described the blooms of yellow and pink, almost orange, as "phenomenal, brilliant," falling between 'Yellow Bird' and 'Sunsation' in color. It blooms in early April and grows to a modest size: 30 feet tall by 10 feet wide in 10 years.

Another consistently popular selection is 'Elizabeth', and 'Sunburst' is developing a following, too, Hammond said.

Paul Reimer of Reimer's Nurseries seconded 'Yellow Bird' [*M. acuminata* x (*M. x brooklynensis* 'Evamaria')], a hardy species that has been around for at least 20 years and sells well in the Toronto area, perhaps because of its name. A deciduous introduction from Brooklyn Botanic Garden, the vigorous, pyramidal tree (40 feet tall by 25 feet wide) produces bright, canary yellow, 3½-inch flowers with foliage in late spring after frost danger.

Reimer also recommended 'Sunsprite', a late bloomer that is very narrow growing and produces yellow flowers with a touch of pink. The plant in Reimer's yard is about 15 feet tall and only 3 feet wide after 12 years.

Reimer is evaluating a new, award-winning introduction that is popular in Europe called 'Daphne'. Dark yellow and slow growing, it is expected to be good for confined spaces.

Alan Branham's favorite yellow is the hard-to-find 'Maxine Merrill'. He also likes 'Lemonade', 'Solar Flare' and 'Sunsation', all of which bloomed after a later frost killed off 'Butterflies' this year.

Branham said to watch for a magnolia not yet on the market called 'Luminescence'. Well-named, it looks like a glowing yellow light bulb and blooms over a long period of time.

'Butterflies' (*M. acuminata* x *M. denudata* 'Sawada's Cream') consistently yields yellow flowers before leaves emerge. Hardy to USDA Zone 3, the medium-sized, pyramidal tree produces an abundance of rich yellow flowers in late spring.

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▲ GENTEEL MAGNOLIAS

it will get frosted some years. All the American native species have enough sense to not bloom too early in America's manic-depressive climate," Branhagen said.

Sweetbay (*M. virginiana*) and southern (*M. grandiflora*) magnolias, like all the big-leaf types (*M. macrophylla*), don't bloom until late spring and into early summer. Because of this timing, though, the flamboyant flowers are somewhat muted; by the time they bloom, flowers have to compete with leaves.

Although the flowers may be worth waiting for and may transcend the dangers of frost, American magnolias — unlike Asian varieties that bloom earlier — are not "exquisitely foliated in flowers," according to Branhagen.

Demand for magnolias is increasing, according to Peter Eastman, sales



Magnolia 'Blushing Belle' is a highly-regarded hardy pink magnolia, esteemed for its delicate color.
PHOTO BY WALTER ALTENMUELLER/REIMER'S NURSERIES



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manager for Countryside and Fairdale Nurseries in Oregon, but cold hardiness has been the biggest challenge for breeders.

Genetics from the hardy, yellow-flowered *M. acuminata* have produced the best results. Successful breeding ▶

Magnolia color palette

An experts' guide

PINK — According to Reimer, “perhaps the best hardy pink in the market is ‘Blushing Belle’,” hybridized in Green Bay, Wisconsin, by Dennis Ledvina, a prolific hybridizer of very hardy magnolias. ‘Blushing Belle’ combines the hardiness of ‘Yellow Bird’ with the large flowers of ‘Caerhay’s Belle’ and is a precocious, later bloomer.

Perennially popular ‘Daybreak’ blooms much later, so the upright, rich pink flowers seldom freeze. “When the weather cooperates with the bloom time, flowers produce a fantastic fragrance. When frosty weather imposes on bloom time, though, the result is a disappointing display,” Hammond said. He also mentioned ‘Galaxy’ has good name recognition, and recommended ‘Pickard’s Ruby’, which blooms heavily as a young tree, its dark pink flowers edged in white.

It was difficult for Branhagen to name his favorite pinks, but he settled on Pink Star Magnolia (*M. stellata* ‘Rosea’) and the new hybrid *M. x loebneri* ‘Pink Petticoats’.

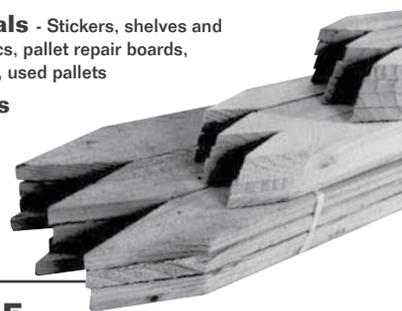
“I am old school and still think the classic saucer magnolias are sublime when they are in bloom,” Branhagen said. “They bloomed fine in Kansas City again this year, since we didn’t have an early ‘late’ frost. We had a late, late frost!”

With their coral overtones, ‘Daybreak’ and ‘Rosemarie’ are great late bloomers and individual flowers are spectacular, but both require many years of growth to achieve full bloom.

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work is coming from Dennis Ledvina in Green Bay, Wisconsin. Ledvina has expanded on the late August Kehr's work with yellow-blooming magnolias.

Accomplishing cold hardiness in plants with pink flowers has proven more elusive, however.

Waiting for maturity

Another concern, particularly for growers of magnolias, is the fact that many magnolias are slow to mature and can take many years before they produce their full bloom. For trees to be good options for sale at retail, they need to be precocious enough to bloom well at an early age.

Branhagen explained: "Hybridizers have introduced too many cultivars, but still need to work on selections for nurserymen to sell — those that produce spectacular and abundant bloom



Moonglow™ magnolia (*M. virginiana* 'Jim Wilson') is a Great Plant Picks selection, noted for its winter interest with green and silver leaves, and its delicate, ivory-white summer blooms. PHOTO COURTESY OF HERITAGE SEEDLINGS

on small plants. Many newer cultivars of magnolia take many years to bloom heavily. They are great plants, but they are hard for nurseries to sell."

For instance, a 3-foot 'Butterflies' magnolia will often take six years to flower fully, Branhagen said.

"New cultivars with spectacular bloom like 'Rosemarie' and 'Toro' take a long time to bloom fully. The plants at Powell Gardens are still not loaded with bloom, and they are close to a decade old."

Magnolia color palette

An experts' guide

WHITE — "I am surprised you didn't mention white flowers or fragrance to choose magnolias by!" exclaimed Branhagen. "Sweetbay, southern and a hybrid called 'Porcelain Dove' are all in bloom at Powell Gardens [in June] and their scents simply fill the air!"

Hammond recommended Spring Welcome® Loebner Magnolia, an introduction developed by North Dakota State University from a seedling. It has proven winter hardy in USDA Zone 3 for the past 20 years, even after winters with temperatures down to minus 38 F. Plants are dense, well branched and flowers are pale pink in bud, gradually opening to pristine white with 11 or more tepals and 3–4½ inches in diameter.



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Magnolia color palette

An experts' guide

PURPLE — Hammond recommended some of the smaller, slow-growing trees with dark purple flowers from New Zealand, including 'Black Tulip', 'Genie' and 'Burgundy Star'. 'Genie' is one of the darkest purples, flowers heavily early in life and may do well in a container.

"To my eye, the color of 'Genie' is too dark," Reimer said, quickly adding that woman gardening friends have told him he is wrong and that the color is exactly right. "It certainly stands out in a garden center."

Several 'Genie' offspring are even slower growing and retain the dark flower color. Varieties such as 'Tinkerbelle', 'Yoda', and 'Mighty Mouse' still require some testing but have potential to fit the niche of a dwarf magnolia.

O'Neill Lily Magnolia (*M. liliiflora*) is an outstanding purple flowerer, according to Branhagen, as is the hybrid 'Marilyn'. "It's too early to tell how some others like 'Purple Prince' and 'Purple Star Power' are going to do for us," he added.

Peter Eastman of Countryside and Fairdale Nurseries pointed out that 'Galaxy' is among the darkest flowers and has both a narrow habit and a late bloom.

Star magnolia (*M. stellata*) and all of its hybrids (*M. × loebneri*) bloom pretty fully as small plants, and some popular cultivars like 'Elizabeth' also bloom heavily as small plants, which makes them better bets at retail.

Growing from cuttings speeds up maturation, Branhagen explained, but big-leaf types like *M. ashei* and *M. macrophylla* must be grown from seed.

"You'll never get a perfect magnolia," Reimer summarized. Reimer places an emphasis on growing magnolias with a proven propensity to flower early in life. He recommended that growers of caliper-size magnolias sell larger, bloom-ready magnolias to landscapers, as he does.

Breeding trends

Dark colors and repeat blooming are two attributes desired by breeders. As breeding improves, so does the stability of the darker bloom colors.

Smaller, slower-growing trees are in demand for landscapes that are limited in size, since many magnolias become big, broad trees.

Heritage Seedlings, a propagation nursery in Salem, Oregon, has grown magnolias for years, and *Magnolia* is among its top four genera. The grower sells 10,000–15,000 grafted, named magnolias per year, usually one- or two-year old whips, typically unbranched.

Heritage consistently sells more of the shrubby, small forms than the tree forms, according to production manager Eric Hammond. Most are shipped out of Oregon to mid-Atlantic and southern states.

Competition is healthy among growers of magnolias, Hammond said. "Fewer growers grow magnolias, but those that do tend to grow more varieties and to do them well."

Magnolias did not take the recent economic downturn as hard as some other crops, Hammond said, probably since the market was not saturated at the time of the downturn.

Magnolias are generally carefree once they get going; however, a new pest, the ambrosia beetle, can cause problems in the field. The boring beetle infects magnolias with a fungus that kills them. So far, it is hard to assess how significant a problem this might be in gardens, Hammond said.

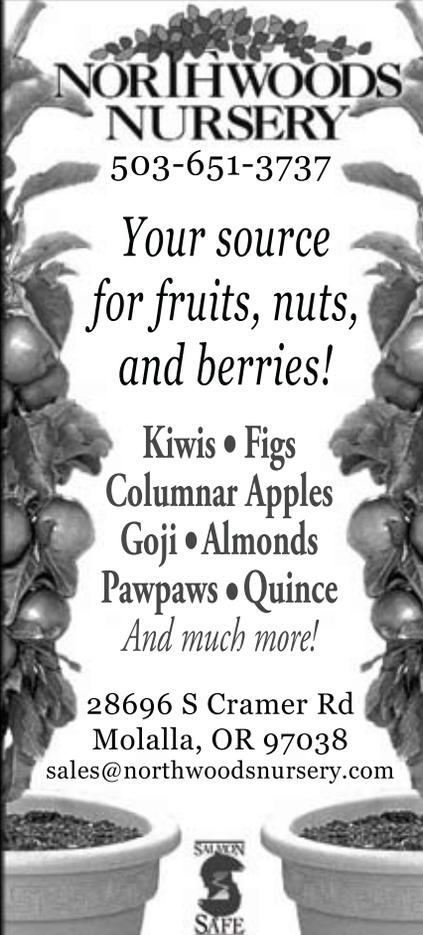
In the Northwest, several species magnolias have been introduced by Cistus Nursery's Sean Hogan. The unusual and beautiful *M. insignis* (red Lotus tree, formerly *Michellia*) is "a perfect little evergreen street tree" that is an exciting option for Portland, Eastman said. ☺

Elizabeth Petersen writes for the garden industry and teaches SAT/ACT test prep at www.satpreppdx.com. She can be reached at gardenwrite@comcast.net or satpreppdx@comcast.net.



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