

## M is for Magnolias

Magnolia trees are beloved for their attractive and fragrant flowers and are a popular ornamental tree in New England. Ranging from large shrubs to very large shade trees that can top 60 feet tall, they include species and cultivars that can find a home in gardens of almost any size.

The *Magnolia* genus contains over 200 species and is one of the earliest known flowering plants, with fossils dating back over 100 million years. Since the trees existed prior to bees, they rely on beetles instead of bees for pollination.



Under a furry winter coat, magnolia buds grow to almost full size, protected from cold weather. (1)

Magnolia flowers open before leaves appear, emerging from large buds that resemble pussy willows; buds form the previous fall, adding interest in the winter landscape. Cup- or star-shaped flowers are composed of between 9 and 18 "tepals," a term used

when the flower parts cannot be classified as either sepals or petals. They range in color from pink and purple to white and yellow.

There are eight magnolia species that are native to the United States; however, many are seldom seen in North American gardens due to their less than showy flowers.

*Magnolia virginiana* (or sweetbay magnolia) is native to the southeastern United States and as far north as New York. The tree can grow up to 35 feet high and wide. It blooms between May and June and has creamy white flowers; cone-like fruits with bright red seeds mature in the fall.

*M. grandiflora* (or southern magnolia) is another U.S. native magnolia. An evergreen species with large glossy leaves and huge creamy white flowers, it has become an iconic symbol of southern gardens. *M. grandiflora* is considered to be winter hardy to USDA Zone 7, with some cultivars hardy in 6b, so it can be grown locally if sited in a protected location. The Arnold Arboretum of Harvard University's extensive magnolia collection includes single specimens of two of the hardier cultivars, *M. grandiflora* 'Pendarvis' and *M. grandiflora* 'Bracken's Brown Beauty.'

In our region the most popular species are the Japanese natives *Magnolia stellata* (or star magnolia) and *Magnolia x soulangiana* (saucer magnolia). The former blooms in early spring and grows 15-20 feet tall and 10-15 feet wide. Popular star magnolia varieties include 'Centennial Blush' and 'Royal Star.'



The flowers of *M. loebneri* 'Merrill' are resistant to spring frost damage. (2)

Saucer magnolias are among the first to bloom in spring. These trees have huge flowers and grow up to 20-30 feet tall. Numerous cultivars are available, offering flowers in various shades of white, pink, rose, purple, magenta and burgundy.

*Magnolia x loebneri*, a hybrid cross of Japanese *M. kobus* and *M. stellata*, is also popular in our region. This small tree grows 20-30 feet tall and features white or blushed pink flowers. Two popular cultivars are 'Merrill' and the more compact 'Leonard Messel.'

Magnolias are easy to grow: They are resistant to many diseases and pests and do not require regular pruning. They can tolerate a range of soils but prefer well drained soil. In regions where frost is possible after the bloom time, magnolias are best sited in an area protected from high winds. Under the right conditions, magnolias can be quite long lived: 100 years or more.