

Magnolia

Welcome to Spring and welcome to my two favourite spring flowering plants, the flowering cherry and the magnolia. What a lovely springtime streetscape the flowering cherries with their 'raining pink petals' make... then, when it comes to the ability to 'look at me' to impress, the magnolia is hard to beat. Coming early in the season with its waxy petals forming goblets on bare branches, a (deciduous) magnolia tree in full bloom is a sight to behold. The evergreen type with shining laurel leaves, rusty stems and shoots, and huge flowers that look as if they were carved from cream wax, is equally a magnificent solitary specimen. Magnolia flowers have to be one of the loveliest and most impressive spring flowers.



The plant is a member of the family *Magnoliaceae*, which consists of well over 100 species and countless cultivars of both deciduous and evergreen trees and shrubs. Originally from Asia and North America, magnolias are now cultivated all over the world and through a wide range of climates. The trees are characterised by large fragrant flowers which may be bowl or star-shaped, in shades of white, cream, pink, purple. On deciduous varieties, the flowers open in early spring before the leaves appear, emerging from large pussy-willow-like buds that set during the previous growing season. Evergreen varieties bloom heaviest during the transition from spring to summer, occasionally one can spot some re-bloom appearing on new growth in early autumn.



How a magnolia bud develops: It first appears wrapped in a sheath or bud scale at the tip of the branch. Then the blossom opens, staying beautiful only for a day or two, then the stamens, spirally arranged at the base of the ovary, below the pistils, start falling off, usually landing on the cups of the petals, then the cone-like ovary (botanically a dry aggregate fruit)



Stamens falling on petals, from flower to seed pod

slowly turning brown, leaving the beginning of the seed pod.

Unlike modern flowers, magnolia flowers lack a distinct petal or sepal, instead bearing a tough combination of the two called tepals that open just like petals. When we look into a magnolia flower, we are looking back into pre-history, the flowers do not produce nectar, they produce pollen. Magnolias are among the first plants on earth to reproduce using flowers pollinated by insects; as at the time of their evolution, many common pollinators we think of today such as bees, butterflies and moths had not evolved yet, magnolias flowers develop tough carpels to avoid damage by pollinating beetles, which were then the primary insect pollinators.

Hybridisation has been very successful in combining the best aspects of different species to produce plants which flower at an earlier age as well as plants having more and more impressive flowers. One of the most popular garden magnolias, *M. soulangeana*, is a hybrid of *M. liliiflora* and *M. denudate* with pink saucer/goblet flowers, another favourite is *Magnolia liliiflora* (lily magnolia), with



Deciduous leaves

deep pink/burgundy flowers of a more upright shape like a champagne flute. *M. stellata*, sometimes called the star magnolia, is a slow-growing shrub or small tree bearing large, showy white or pink star-shaped flowers. Apart from large, fragrant blossoms, magnolia trees also feature beautiful foliage and exotic-looking pods, the evergreen species feature

Evergreen leaves, glossy green top side, golden fuzzy underside



leaves dark glossy green topside and golden fuzzy underside. Magnolias are fairly adaptable and will thrive in warm to temperate regions. Their life expectancy varies among different species, most have been known to survive for 100 years or longer. The flowers of many species are considered edible. In some Asian cuisines, the buds are pickled and used to flavour rice and scent tea; young leaves and flower buds of *M. hypoleuca* are broiled and eaten as a vegetable, older leaves are made into a powder and used as seasoning, dried whole leaves can be filled with miso, leeks, daikon, shiitake and broiled. The leaves of *M. obovata* are sometimes used for wrapping food and cooking dishes. The flower buds of *M. liliiflora* have been used in traditional Chinese medicine as a sedative herb that helps constricting blood vessel in the nasal passage, the bark of *M. officinalis* is considered a muscle relaxant herb that improves digestion. In industry, large size tree can be harvested as a timber tree.

Michelia or Magnolia?

Michelias are in fact a type of magnolia. They used to be seen as close relatives, but now have been reclassified botanically as magnolias. They are a small genus of trees and shrubs from southern Asia and the foothills of the Himalayas. Unlike magnolias, michelias are usually evergreen, and the flowers of many species are highly fragrant. The most commonly grown michelias in Australian gardens are *Michelia figo*, also known as the port-wine magnolia, and *Michelia doltsopa* with its large, sweetly scented white to cream flowers. Michelias are versatile plants, they respond well to pruning, as they set flower buds down the stem at nearly every leaf axel, not just on the tips, they can be clipped tightly and used in topiaries; they make good hedges; they give masses of flowers, many are scented; most plants peak in spring but some keep on flowering for months on end and some will even have a second blooming. And last but not least, they are pretty much free of all pests and diseases.