

Growing Magnolias at Asperupgaard, Asperup, Denmark

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Basic conditions

Asperup is situated less than two miles (three kilometers) from the northwestern coast of the Island of Fyn (Fuenen), Denmark. The latitude of Asperup is 55.48 N. The corresponding USDA climatic zone is zone 7, however, the climate is quite different here.

The annual average temperature is 46.6°F (8.1°C), and the average temperature for the two coldest months (January and February) is 32.6°F (0.3°C). The warmest months (July and August) have an average temperature of 61°F (16.1°C). So, winters are usually not too cold and summers usually quite cool. The yearly precipitation is 25in (63.5cm), but spring is often quite dry—April, May, June together average only 5in (13.7cm) of rain. Summers can be warm and dry, but are more often changeable: warm and sunny periods followed by cool, wet and windy periods, and vice versa. Every year we have at least a couple of weeks with temperatures above 77°F (25°C), and occasionally we experience one or more days with temperatures above 86°F (30°C).

During the last 100 years we experienced 15 winters with the sea frozen, so that icebreakers had to assist ships. The last time was 1995-96. That winter, I measured temperatures below -4°F (-20°C). However, most winters are rather mild and wet with wind from the west (the North Sea), interrupted by shorter or longer cold periods with winds from the east or north. When lucky, we have some snow cover in cold periods but black frost is common. A cold spell can occur any time between November and March. And even if March is considered to be the beginning of spring, there is often night frost in April, and even in May.

The soil is clay-ey, pH neutral. There is reasonable wind protection from the west, east and north, but part of the garden is open to the south.

The garden

I started gardening in the late 70s, when I moved to the Island of Fyn. The garden had been neglected for many years—I found the remnants of a commercial fruit garden consisting of apples and plums, but main-



Magnolia 'Galaxy'

ly pears. Apart from that, there were self-sown ash trees, maples, alder trees, etc, as well as nettles and other weeds. Some of the 100-year old pear trees are more than 33ft (10m) tall and are very ornamental.

After the initial clearing, I planted a collection of old roses and wild roses (I never liked modern roses). When you start a new garden you need results in the first season! Many of these roses are still in the garden.

Since roses are only interesting for a short period in high summer, I started collecting and propagating rhododendrons, mainly species. And, I spent a lot of money on acid topsoil for these plants.

The first magnolias

The first magnolia I acquired was *M. × soulangeana* 'San José.' This proved to be a magnificent plant, vigorous, and loaded with flowers every year. Most years it escapes night frost. The plant is now at least 30ft (9m), quite tall for a *soulangeana* in Denmark.

The next magnolias to be added to the collection were *M. liliiflora* 'Nigra' and *M. sieboldii*. *Magnolia liliiflora* 'Nigra' is very slow here. I have it in a sunny position, but after more than 25 years it is still only 6.5ft (2m) tall, with a spreading habit. Flowering starts in May and lasts most of



Magnolia 'lolanthe'

summer. My first *M. sieboldii* (labeled *M. parviflora*) was always a weak plant, or was it planted in the wrong place?

However, magnolias were still not my prime interest. That changed during an Easter holiday spent in London, where I rather unexpectedly lost my heart to magnolias. Seeing the magnificent magnolias in Kew Garden and Windsor Great Park convinced me that my garden should, little by little, be transformed into a garden concentrating on magnolias in the canopy with rhododendrons underneath.

In the early 80s I planted various *M. stellata* and *M. × loebneri*, which were the only varieties I could get in Denmark at the time—I lost some, probably because of my inexperience. Some of these varieties proved to be very slow growing and even today hardly more than 6.5ft (2m) tall, but spreading to 16ft (5m). However, *M. × loebneri* 'Leonard Messel' is a potent grower. It is now 23ft (7m) tall, extremely floriferous, and I don't remember that it was ever harmed by late frosts.

But, not all plants grew according to the advice given by the nursery! About *M. stellata* 'King Rose,' I was told that it was a very slow growing variety and that it would probably not surpass 6.5ft (2m) in 50 years. It has, however, passed 20ft (6m) in 25 years, and as you may have guessed—I planted it in the wrong location!

From another nursery, I got better advice when buying *Liriodendron tulipifera*. I was wondering how long I would have to wait for flowers. The owner of the nursery told me, after some hesitation, that they usually estimated a waiting period of about 14 years. And, exactly after 14 winters, I saw the first flowers! This *Liriodendron* is now one of the tallest trees in my garden, approximately 40ft (12m).

I dreamed of having an Umbrella magnolia. The nursery sent me a plant labeled *M. tripetala*, but that's not what I got. Later I found out that the plant was *M. × proctoriana*. This is, however, a lovely magnolia, 23ft (7m) tall and the first to flower in the spring. Most years, *M. × proctoriana* starts flowering end of March. I remember years when the tree was clad in white flowers while the ground was still partly covered in snow. And, every year after flowering, the white tepals cover the ground completely for some days. The flowers can withstand slight frost, but they are prone to wind damage.

Imported plants from Hillier in the 80s

The selection of magnolias available in Denmark was rather limited during this time. For this reason I started importing magnolias from abroad. Hillier (U.K.) sent me many fine plants, some of which are discussed below.

The overall appearance of *M. tripetala* (this time true to label!) is heavy and exotic, and it would be out of place in a small garden. The leaves often exceed 2ft (60cm). The magnolia started flowering at the height of 6.5ft (2m), much earlier than I had expected. Now the tree is 26ft (8m) tall. I especially enjoy watching the tree when the flowers open in the evening. I do so at some distance, because I am not too fond of the scent! *Magnolia tripetala* sets plenty of spectacular seed cones every year. The black-brown autumn color is also quite spectacular, and in winter you can enjoy the sculptural qualities of the 'skeleton.' *Magnolia tripetala* thrives in the light shade of a tall *Cedrela sinensis*. This tree is an asset all year round.

Magnolia cylindrica from Hillier is supposed to be identical with 'Pegasus.' Only in my tree there is no trace of purple at the base of the tepals. But, whatever it is, it's a most attractive plant, upright, but less than 16ft (5m) tall. And, every April it is covered with delightful white flowers.

Magnolia denudata has for many years been growing as a bush—10ft (3m) tall but much wider. Lately it has gained a tendency to grow more like a tree—a tree in the middle of the bush, if you like!

The dark purple *M. × soulangeana* 'Lennei' is much slower and later flowering than cv. 'San José.' Unfortunately, the structure of the branches is very untidy and the plant is prone to wind damage, especially in a summer storm.

Magnolia wilsonii is a favorite of mine, flowering in May with pendulous white flowers with a very spicy and delicious scent. Both buds and flowers hang the same way as a lamp shade. *Magnolia wilsonii* is supposed to be rather tender, and for that reason I planted it under the canopy of an old pear tree with the intention of felling the pear tree when the magnolia seemed established. However, the pear tree is still there! Because of this the magnolia stretches for light and has adopted the sprawling habit common for *M. sieboldii*.

I have a six-year old seedling of this same *M. wilsonii* planted in full sun. This plant is now 8ft (2m) tall, single-stemmed, but densely clad in side branches all the way from the ground. I intend to prune these branches little by little.

Magnolia × wieseneri (labeled *M. watsonii*) is one of my best plants. The flowers have a strong and delightful scent that, especially in the evening, can be smelled from a long distance. I have studied and compared habits of *M. × wieseneri* with its parents *M. sieboldii* (labeled *M. sinensis*) planted the same year, and *M. obovata*.

Magnolia × wieseneri is, generally speaking, something between the parents. Its growth habit is much like *M. sieboldii*—bushy, sprawling and untidy—but the branches are thicker, and it is more open than *M. sieboldii*. Its leaves are intermediate in size and quite coarse and leathery.

At first, *M. sieboldii* was the more vigorous plant, but after five or six years, *M. × wieseneri* took off and is now taller than 13ft (4m), whereas *M. sieboldii* is still hardly more than 10ft (3m). The main flowering period is June until the beginning of July. But, there are always a few flowers in August and sometimes in September or even October. Flowers in the autumn are considerably smaller than flowers in early summer—often just half the size. These flowers are produced mainly on small twigs on the more or less horizontal branches. These twigs produce about 1in (2-3cm) of growth every year ending in a whorl of leaves and a flower bud. After flowering these twigs will grow an inch to produce a new flower bud for the next season.

But the bush/tree also produces long thin upright branches that generally end in a flower. These vertical branches will usually, after some



Magnolia 'King Rose'

years, fall down to a more horizontal position, and start producing small flower twigs.

Magnolia × *wieseneri* is, in some European nurseries, mixed up with 'Charles Coates.' Also there seem to be inferior forms on the market. The clone from Hillier is excellent. I planted it in a sunny position between rhododendrons. It flowered the first time after a couple of years. So far, I have not had problems with this plant and it was not injured in the very cold winters in the late 80s. Also, the scent is the best and strongest from any magnolia my nose has come across.

Magnolia obovata showed from the beginning its potential as a tall, single-stemmed tree. It started flowering at the height of approximately 13ft (4m). Unfortunately, this *M. obovata* was destroyed in the December 1999 hurricane, when an apple tree overturned and broke the stem of the magnolia. The magnolia was about 26ft (8m) tall. I have another, younger *M. obovata*. This tree is 13-16ft (4-5m) tall, but still hasn't flowered, and sometimes suffers from branch dieback.

I have tried *M. virginiana*. For many years I had a nice, slow growing bush with a few delightful, small, fragrant flowers every summer. Unfortunately, a falling branch in the December 1999 hurricane hit the plant. After the main stem had died, quite unexpectedly a new shoot

arose from underground. However, This shoot is very weak and miserable looking and, after five years, is no more than 16in (40cm) tall! No flowers of course. But, *M. Virginiana* is possible in Denmark. There is a nice specimen in the Botanical Garden in Copenhagen.

Magnolias planted in the early 90s, mainly from local nurseries

Magnolia acuminata var. *subcordata* in my garden is a small, shady tree and after 16 years is about 13ft (4m) tall. I like the green-yellow flowers that seem to turn into a warm yellow at the end of the day.

Magnolia macrophylla is a favorite of mine. If possible, it looks even more exotic than *tripetala*, but the leaves are (at least in my garden) smaller. Unfortunately it is not as hardy as *tripetala* and my plant suffers from severe bark split. Nonetheless, it is free flowering and all shoots end in a flower bud. The tree has a new competitive leader stem that will flower this summer for the first time at the height of 6.5ft (2m). Probably the old stem (11ft (3m) tall), which is suffering from bark split, will die in a couple of years. Ten years ago, the same thing happened to the original leader stem, which died.

Magnolia 'Susan' is easy and much more vigorous than *M. liliiflora*. However, when compared to *M. liliiflora*, it lacks the delicious scent and the bigger contrast in coloring of the outside and inside of the corolla.

Magnolia 'Heaven Scent' is a most vigorous and free-flowering hybrid. I have seen it recommended for small gardens. I would not make such a recommendation as my plant is, after 15 years, nearly 26ft (8m) tall, and 33ft (10m) wide. There is not much 'scent' in the flowers, so 'Heaven Sent' might have been a more appropriate name.

Magnolia 'Galaxy' has been planted not far from *M.* 'Heaven Scent.' After 13 years it is nearly as tall as 'Heaven Scent,' growing upright but multi-stemmed. The explanation for this could be that the nursery removed the original leader to comply with the demand for bushy plants. Seen against a blue sky, the color of the flowers is breathtaking. Both magnolias are quite late and never affected by night frost. But 'Galaxy' flowers only for a couple of weeks, whereas 'Heaven Scent' goes on unfolding a few flowers in July, and is re-flowering in August or September. At that time, 'Galaxy' will only occasionally display a flower, or two.

Magnolia 'Iolanthe,' a Jury hybrid, grew rather fast and upright. As it grows older the small tree (16ft (5m)) is getting wider, but the crown



Magnolia × *wieseneri*

remains very open. It flowers for a long period in April and May and some flowers have extra tepals.

Plants from Eisenhut in the late 90s

Magnolia 'Leda' flowered for the first time last year with perfect white flowers. It started flowering at the end of April, a few days later than 'Iolanthe.' The tree is 13ft (4m) tall, but I will have to stake it for the next few years. At 3ft (1m) from the ground the diameter of the stem is only 1in (3cm). In a storm last summer it bent down and the top touched the ground! But amazingly no harm was done. By the way, *M.* 'Iolanthe' performed much the same way and I had it staked for 7-8 years.

Magnolia 'Albatross' was planted same year as 'Leda,' This plant is slower here, only 8ft (2m), and still has no flower buds.

Magnolia 'Yellow Fever' is upright and the same height as 'Albatross.' But, again, no flower buds.

Magnolia 'Freeman' (*M. grandiflora* × *virginiana*) is a success. I planted it into the garden six years ago—at first in a very protected place. Two years later it was moved to a more sunny position, but protected against morning sun in winter, and for the last three years it has been flowering. The flowers are quite like a typical *grandiflora*, but smaller, and they have a nice scent. The single flower only lasts a couple of days, but the

swelling buds are also very attractive. Here they are produced intermittently from July till October. The 6.5ft (2m) tall plant was never seriously damaged by frost, only after one winter it suffered from some leaf burn. However, it is prone to branch damage in heavy melting snow.

Plants from Wim Rutten

Two years ago Wim Rutten (the Netherlands) sent me grafted plants of *M.* 'Daybreak,' 'Daphne,' 'Lois' and 'Sunsation.' The last mentioned had two flower buds. For comparison with *M.* × *wieseneri*, I also got *M.* 'Åshild Kalleberg.'

Additionally I got grafted plants of *Magnolia grandiflora* 'Bracken's Brown Beauty' and 'Kay Paris.' 'Bracken's Brown Beauty' had a flower last summer, but for safety I have taken the plant into my greenhouse for this winter (winter of 2005/2006), and I will probably do the same for the next couple of years. But 'Kay Paris' was left outside without any protection. It seems unhurt by this year's winter.

I got a *M. dianica*, but I have so far not ventured it outside in winter. Maybe I'll have the guts next autumn!

Seedlings

Every year *M. tripetala* and *M. wilsonii* produce plenty of viable seeds and *M. sieboldii* produces at least some cones. Occasionally there will be cones on some of the *M. stellatas*, and contorted cones on various *M.* × *soulangiana* and 'Galaxy.' That's all.

I am sowing seeds from the MS1 seed counter. I have six 10ft- (2-3m-) tall seedlings of 'Big Dude,' 'Ann Ross' and 'Forrest's Pink.' Seedlings of *M. dawsoniana* and *M. amoena* are also fast growing, whereas *M. zenii* is much slower, but unproblematic. None of these plants ever suffered from winter damage. And, to my surprise, a couple of small seedlings of *M. campbellii* var. *mollicomata* will probably survive their third winter in the garden. However they are not very vigorous—guess they need more heat in summer.

I am experimenting with *M. macrophylla* seedlings from different sources, as well as var. *ashei* and *macrophylla* × *ashei*. I hope to find a variety that is fully hardy here.

Growing evergreen magnolias is tempting! Because of our cool summers, I am not sure if it will ever be possible to grow *M. grandiflora* satisfactorily in Denmark. I have seedlings from different clones of *grandiflora* that have withstood three to four winters outside. Those seed-

lings that survived the first winter (approximately 50%), have all survived the succeeding two to three winters.

Some years ago I got CNTS-seeds of *Magnolia biloba*. One seedling was planted in the garden when only 6in (15cm) in height. Two years later the plant was 7ft (2.15m) tall—actually the fastest growing magnolia I've ever had! But, still no trace of bi-lobed leaves. Only one seedling of this batch has so far produced leaves with a (rather small) notch. This plant is much slower, only half the size of plants with a pointed apex. The same year I got *M. biloba* seed collected at Herkenrode. All these plants have leaves that are deeply notched at the apex, but are quite slow. The tallest plant is only 3ft (1m).

Miscellaneous

Three years ago from a garden center, I bought, , some interesting magnolias imported from China, all small plants (and quite cheap), but loaded with flower buds. When I took them out of the pot, I realized, that these plants had been root washed, most of the root cut off, the plant put into a pot, the root covered with sphagnum, not even planted! I managed to keep two alive, *M. 'Fragrant Cloud'* and *M. 'Yellow River.'* After two years of stabilization the latter is ready to flower again.

Last week, I found Chinese plants of a much better quality in a local nursery. I bought a nearly 6.5ft (2m) high *M. 'Satisfaction.'* Taught by experience, I did first check the roots carefully! But this plant had been potted the proper way, and had produced new roots in the pot. So I hope transplanting it into the garden will be a success.

Conclusion

Many different magnolias do surprisingly well in Denmark. The growth rate is slower than in climates with a longer growing season, of course. But because spring comes late, we sometimes escape night frost in the flowering season. Some desirable plants are surprisingly adapted to this climate. *Magnolia × wieseneri*, that is often regarded as tender or difficult to please, has so far grown much to perfection.

On my website www.asperupgaard.dk you can see more pictures of magnolias and other plants in my garden.

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