

Southern Magnolia, Queen of Trees

By Susan Camp

A walk around our property on the day after our recent snowfall reminded me of the beauty of trees in winter. All of the deciduous trees show their bare branches, save one tall beech that keeps its rusty-brown leaves until spring. The evergreens provide color and keep us from feeling totally dejected on dreary winter days.

The towering southern magnolia (*Magnolia grandiflora*) near the entrance to our property is the loveliest tree we have. Like a grand old lady, dressed in green satin with white lace trim, she displays her leaves, perfect by themselves, but more beautiful dusted with snow.

Approximately 125 species of evergreen, semi-evergreen, and deciduous magnolias exist, native to the eastern United States, Central America, the West Indies, and Asia. In addition, hundreds of named hybrids have been developed, ranging from small shrubs to massive specimen trees. There is a magnolia for every yard size.

The southern magnolia is the classic tree for a southern yard, providing there is a space large enough to feature a tree that grows 60 to 80 feet tall and 30 to 50 feet around. The property owner must cast a shrewd eye on the proposed spot for placement of a southern magnolia, avoiding close proximity to other trees. The magnolia's large, ropy roots spread as far as three times the length of the limbs, and will interfere with root systems of other trees. Magnolias should be planted far away from power lines to avoid the necessity of unsightly pruning. Magnolia branches break easily in high winds or ice storms, so a protected spot is desirable, if possible. The thin, gray bark will split easily from contact with lawnmowers and weed eaters.

M. grandiflora is species hardy to USDA Hardiness Zones 6b to 9 and some cultivars are hardy in Zones 5b to 6. It prefers moist, well-drained, acidic soil with a pH of 3.5 to 7 in full sun to partial shade. Early spring is the best time to plant southern magnolia. Before planting, cut any roots that are girdling the root ball or trunk.

The 5 to 10-inch-long, glossy, dark green leaves are one of magnolia's most attractive features, but the fragrant, creamy-white flowers that bloom in spring and early summer are its crowning achievement. The blossoms can reach 8 to 12 inches in diameter. Magnolias are pollinated by several species of beetles that use the fat-rich pollen as their food source. The fuzzy brown seed cones, 3 to 8 inches long, appear in late summer and ripen from September to November, splitting open to reveal red-orange seeds that provide food for migrating songbirds.

Pruning is rarely necessary, unless branches have been damaged. The long, graceful limbs sweep the ground, and provide habitat for small animals. Some property owners prefer to prune the lower limbs for ease of mowing, but others find this act objectionable. To prune or not to prune a southern magnolia is an emotional issue for many gardeners!

M. grandiflora has few disease or insect pest problems. Algal leaf spot can occur in humid climates. Several species of scale insects and two species of beetles can infest magnolia. The size

of the tree usually makes chemical agents difficult or impossible to apply, although horticultural oil can be applied to reachable areas infested with scale. Burn all diseased or damaged debris.

Virginia Cooperative Extension (VCE) Publication 2901-1069 “Southern Magnolia (*Magnolia grandiflora*)” provides information on this elegant tree and Clemson University Extension publication HGIC 1015 “Magnolia” discusses several species of magnolia.

Our magnolia tree provides food for songbirds and habitat for rabbits under its ground-sweeping branches. A stand of raspberry canes has grown up on one side of the tree. The wild “turkey girls” who roam the area eat the berries and peck for grubs and insects under the tree’s branches. Many seeds have grown into young trees, and the space underneath the tree resembles a miniature forest of magnolias, a perfect hideout for a child, or anyone young at heart.

January 25, 2018