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## The Beauty and Benefits of Magnolias

*Andrew Bunting*

Magnolias are one of the most versatile groups of plants that are cultivated nearly worldwide. They range from trees to shrubs, evergreen to deciduous; are available in most colors except true blues and reds; and there are many selections that are native.

### Eastern Native Magnolias

All native magnolias are native to the eastern half of the United States. One of the most popular and versatile of the native magnolias is the sweetbay magnolia, *Magnolia virginiana var. australis*. In its native habitat it's often found growing in marshy areas or along the edge of a pond. It's one of the very few magnolias that can tolerate wet soils.

Reaching 30 to 40 ft. at maturity, it can be grown as a single-trunked tree or as a multi-stemmed clump. In mid-spring, creamy white flowers appear. While it never has an abundance of flowers, each flower has a beautiful lemony fragrance. Flowering can happen all summer and into the fall, therefore maintaining a steady fragrance in the garden.

In the more southern states, the sweetbay magnolia tends to be fully evergreen, while from Maryland north to Massachusetts it will tend to be deciduous. However, there are a few good cultivars that exhibit more evergreen traits, even in the north, including Henry Hicks, Satellite, Green Shadow and Moonglow.

### Bring on the Southern Charm

The Southern magnolia is another native that's a globally popular species for its exceptional evergreen leaves, as well as its ability to grow quickly and versatility to be used as a hedge, espalier or as a specimen in the garden or landscape. Over the years, many, many cultivars have been introduced. For the small garden, one of my favorites for diminutive foliage, flowers and stature is Kay Parris. Like many magnolias, it has a brown fuzz or indumentum on the underside of the leaves that adds to its ornament.



*Pictured: Magnolia x kewensis Wada's Memory is an early-flowering white magnolia that features exceptional fragrance. Magnolia Lois has a compact habit and bright yellow, chalice-shaped flowers. Kay Parris Magnolia grandiflora at the Bartlett Arboretum & Gardens in Stamford, Connecticut.*

A newer introduction is *Magnolia grandiflora* Southern Charm Teddy Bear, which has medium-sized, intensely fragrant flowers. At maturity it will only reach 20-ft. tall with a spread of 12 ft. The round leaves have a beautiful brown indumentum on the undersides of the leaves that adds to the ornamental attributes. I've seen Teddy Bear effectively used as a single specimen or for hedging and screening.



## Even More Versatile Options

For spring-flowering magnolias, the choices are truly endless, however, the following are some of my favorites that will thrive in most climates. One of the most common magnolias offered in garden centers is an old selection—Leonard Messel. It only reaches 15- to 20-ft. tall, making it a good selection for the smaller garden. In early spring, it's covered with soft pink, star-like flowers that are fragrant. The flowers emerge before the leaves. It's related to the star magnolia, *Magnolia stellata*, which is another excellent choice.



Leonard Messel and the star magnolias, including Centennial with pure white flowers, are very hardy and thrive in the upper Midwestern states. Wild Cat is closely related to the aforementioned, but becomes more tree-like over time, reaching 20-ft. tall with a pyramidal habit covered in exquisite white, camellia-like flowers.

And *Magnolia x kewensis* Wada's Memory is another early flowering white magnolia with exceptional fragrance. This fast-growing magnolia will bloom at an early age, is

upright and pyramidal for decades, then with maturity will become broader in its stature.

## Early Bloomers

A great group of magnolias for more mid-spring are the "yellow magnolias." Over the last 30 years, considerable hybridizing work has resulted in many exemplary cultivars of magnolias. Elizabeth was one of the earliest to be released by the Brooklyn Botanical Garden and remains one of the best today with a slightly sweet fragrance and soft, sulfur-yellow flowers.

Lois is more compact in its habit, and has brighter yellow and chalice-shaped flowers. Butterfly is one of the hardiest and earliest to flower of the yellow magnolias and has a profusion of rich, yellow flowers. Because one of the parents of the yellow magnolias is the cucumber magnolia, *Magnolia acuminata*—which can reach over 100-ft. tall—many of the yellow magnolias can reach 30- to 50-ft. tall over time.

One of the shortcomings of the earliest flowering magnolias is that they bloom so early in the spring or late winter that they run the chance of having the flowers killed by frost or freezes. *Magnolia Mercury* is a new, large-flowered magnolia that's deep pink in bud and then opens to a lighter lavender-pink. It also has a very upright habit.

For the small garden or perfect for a city backyard is a New Zealand introduction—Genie. At maturity, Genie only reaches 13-ft. tall with a spread of 6 ft. The flowers are a stunning deep magenta to maroon color and are fragrant.

An older series of magnolias commonly referred to as "the girls" were introductions made by the National Arboretum. They come in varying shades of pink and purple, but are also good for the smaller garden and include such selections as Betty with pinkish-purple flowers; Ann with outer flowers that are deeper pink and a lighter pink

inner flower; and Jane with bubblegum-pink flowers and pure white in the inner part of the flower.

This only represent a cross section of some of the best magnolias, however, there are literally hundreds of wonderful cultivars and species to choose from. For more information on magnolias, go to the Magnolia Society International website: [www.magnoliasociety.org](http://www.magnoliasociety.org). **GP**

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