

Marsh Gardens Newsletter

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We are trying a different delivery system: Please bear with. I am new to this particular Eudora type, and until such time as I have a dedicated computer, we will be using Dave Garinger's account. My email is eric.larson@yale.edu

- We would like to welcome the newest member of the Marsh Gardens family, a figure that many people will think they have met before. But, for those Star Wars enthusiasts, it is a distant cousin who joins us, one whom we have dubbed "R2Dirt2." The wet/dry shop vacuum is now available. We have special nozzles, tubes, and 'crevasse cleaners' which we will make available, by request, on an 'as-needed' basis. Please request at least a day in advance, and we will bring it to you, sign it out to you and pick it up in the same day. There will be no exceptions to this rule. This should make for a cleaner environment, and perhaps cut down on such critters as live in the debris under the shelves. R2Dirt2 is easy to use, lightweight for carrying, but packs a whopping 3.5 peak horse-power. Three and a half horses sucking on a straw, now there's a word picture for you...Anyway, R2Dirt2 is now available for visitations.
- In other news, Dave Garinger, the Marsh Horticulturist, is very enthusiastic about the first of the cactus and succulent shipments that he has received in our attempts to replace some species that died in the 'greenhouse heating failure' last winter. He has also exerted initiative in adding a few species to the collection. Anyone interested in a quick tour is welcome to visit.
- We are also working on the up-keep of the outdoor collections, including weeding, pruning, mulching and general "gussyin' up."
- I received a call from one of the members of the Big Tree Commission here in Connecticut, who found a mislabeled tree on the Marsh Grounds. That's the bad news. The good news is that the tree, far from being the rather common **Thuja occidentalis**, is a **Thuja standishii**, a rare and wonderful tree. The great news is that it is a state champion, meaning there is no known larger specimen in Connecticut. We will be receiving a certificate in the mail shortly.
- We are working on a strategic plan for the garden. This document is a work-in-progress, and will be a subject for future discussion. After some more revision, a careful check with the steering committee and a little hand-wringing, we will make this document available so that we can include as many as possible in this process.

Our plant of the week this issue comes as a result of a question from a reader who asked what species of Magnolia is blooming now with the purple flowers. Without doing a thorough examination of every Magnolia blooming purple, I can safely say that the majority are probably the Saucer Magnolia, or **Magnolia x soulangiana**.

This hybrid is a member of the Magnolia family, Magnoliaceae, which has seven genera and around 200 species. The familial geographical distribution includes tropical and temperate zones in all continents except Africa. The Magnolia genus includes some 70 species, and is named for Pierre Magnol (1638-1715), a professor of botany at Montpellier. Our particular plant is a hybrid, a result of seed borne by **M. denudata** fertilized by pollen of **M. lilliflora**. This work was done in the early 1820's, in Fromont ,

France, in the garden of Soulange-Bodin, a French cavalry officer and Director of the Royal Institute of Horticulture. Whether he did the actual work, or had several gardeners playing at this, the result was that they named the cultivar (or 'cultivated variety') after Monsieur Solange-Bodin.

After the introduction of this hybrid, more selections of the same cross were made, and now there are literally dozens of named varieties, with flower color being the central point of the variables. Some introductions are more frost-hardy, which is important. The one downfall of this plant's ornamental value is that it blooms at a time in spring when a late frost can 'blast' the bloom, creating an ugly brown mess where a lovely fragrant (although this trait is somewhat variable) flower should be.

The Saucer Magnolia almost defines spring, with huge pink, to purple to white flowers in April. Most spring blooming species do so with no attempt to put out leaves first, and this Magnolia is no exception to that rule of thumb. After the flowers have dropped, which, depending on weather, may happen after as much as two weeks of bloom, the medium green attractive leaves emerge, providing shade beneath this small to medium sized tree (25-35 feet in my experience here on the East Coast).

Beyond the wonderful spring flowering, there is no seasonal interest: no fall color to speak of, no interesting fruit or seed (most of the varieties seem to be sterile) and no exfoliating bark. That being said, if one's yard is big enough to accommodate a single-season plant, the Saucer Magnolia would be a great choice, under-planted with Hellebore's, or Lenten-Rose, or perhaps one of the mid-season Daffodils. The smaller 'minor bulbs' would be nice, contrasting not only flower color but flower size.

Saucer Magnolia's prefer a good garden soil, on the acid side (whoops, Hellebore's prefer a neutral and even alkaline soil...maybe not a good combination), and full sun to light shade. They are available in the nursery trade, and can be purchased as a balled-and-burlapped plant, or in a pot. Always try to look for a plant whose top growth is in proportion to its root growth.

There are other Magnolia's to check out: The Star Magnolia (***M. stellata***) blooms even earlier, remains a shrubby small specimen, and the fragrance is wonderful. Southern, or Bull-Bay Magnolia (***M. grandiflora***) is marginally hardy here, but if sited in the correct micro-climate on the south side of a house or wall, will provide evergreen structure through the winter, and intoxicating fragrance throughout the summer. There are other species of Magnolia's to check out, and all seem to do well in the soils here.

Some additions and errata:

I forgot to mention that last week's plant, the lovely Dandelion, is also incredibly nutritious when the young leaves are harvested, parboiled and served like Chard or Spinach. They provide Vitamins A and C, and loads of Iron. Do make sure you harvest your greens (and your flowers for Dandelion wine for that matter) from areas that you know have not been sprayed with herbicides, or from areas near roadways or other sources of 'non-point source' contamination.

Again, any contributions toward the plant of the week, either with suggestions for subjects, or even written pieces will be given consideration. Opposing viewpoints and criticism are also welcome.

Until next week.

