

Marvelous magnolias to spring forth in Delaware

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Several species of marvelously large-flowered magnolia trees can be grown in Delaware. One of these, sweetbay magnolia, is a Delaware native.

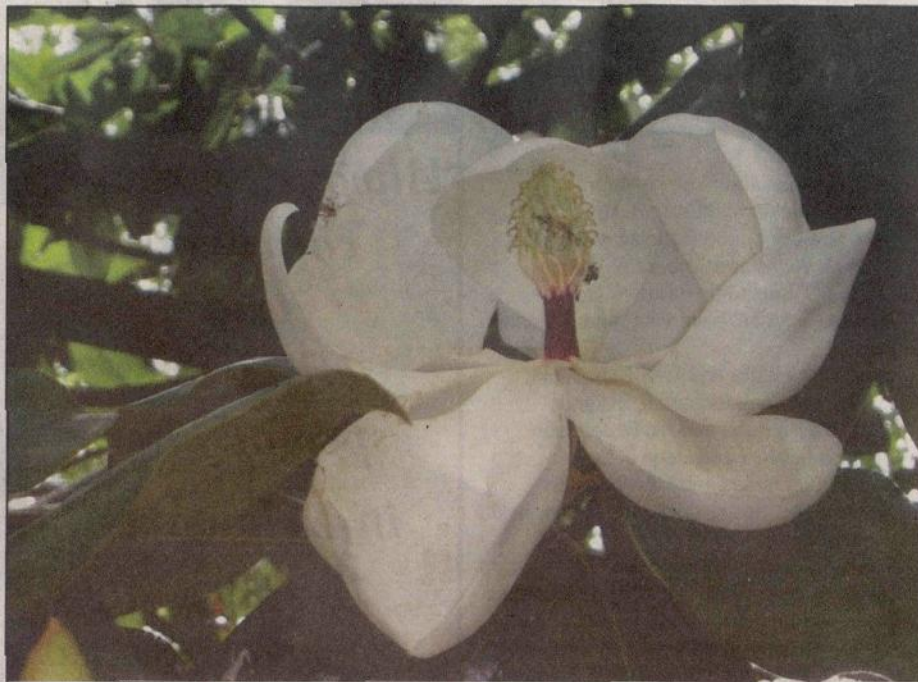
Sweetbay magnolia (*Magnolia virginiana*) grows naturally along streams and swamps in Delaware, and is a very attractive small tree to plant! The fragrant white/creamy-white flowers typically open in June, and the leaves are nearly evergreen. It

grows to 20-30 feet tall, and it prefers moist soil and part shade to full sun. Its range extends along the coastal plain and piedmont of the eastern U.S. from New Jersey south to Florida.

The commonly planted southern magnolia (*Magnolia grandiflora*) is a tall tree, with large white flowers. It's easy to recognize with its big evergreen leaves that are glossy green above and often brownish-hairy beneath. Its natural range is in the southeastern coastal plain, as far north as southeastern Virginia, so it's not native to Delaware. The southern magnolia outside our house in Dover is just starting to bloom right now, and I'm looking forward to seeing and smelling the blossoms!

The other tall magnolia tree is cucum-

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Southern magnolia (*Magnolia grandiflora*), native to the southeastern U.S.,

ber magnolia (*Magnolia acuminata*), with pale green flowers that are not very showy. It's planted in parks because of its hardiness and tolerance of a variety of soil conditions. The largest cucumber magnolia in

Delaware State University/Susan Yost is just beginning to bloom in Delaware.

Delaware, located in Dover, is 118 feet tall, with a trunk diameter of over 4 feet.

Two ornamental magnolias from Asia are very commonly planted for their displays of white/pink blossoms in early

spring. These are saucer magnolia (*Magnolia x soulangeana*), a hybrid with large bowl-shaped flowers; and star magnolia (*Magnolia stellata*), with narrower petals. Both are relatively small trees, and produce an abundance of flowers before they leaf out.

Several other magnolias are notable for their very large leaves, like umbrella magnolia (*Magnolia tripetala*) which is adventive in the piedmont of Delaware (adventive refers to a species that is native to another state, but has naturalized here). Bigleaf magnolia (*Magnolia macrophylla*) has the largest leaves of any native North American tree, but it's said to be hard to grow and to have leaves that tear easily in the wind.

Magnolias have a cone-like woody fruit, called an aggregate fruit. The shiny red seeds, eaten and dispersed by birds, hang from slits in the fruits on bungee-cord-like threads. Try pulling gently on a seed and see how far the thread stretches!

In Delaware, there is just one other native genus in the Magnolia family, in addition to *Magnolia*, and that is *Liriodendron*. *Liriodendron tulipifera*, tulip-tree, is the tallest species of tree in the northeastern United States. You can see that magnolia and tulip-tree are related by comparing the flowers, which have a similar structure. The flowers of tulip-tree open in May, and

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are green with orange blotches; and the fruit is a cone-like aggregate of dry winged fruits (samaras)

The magnolia family (Magnoliaceae) is useful to botanists as an example of relatively primitive flowering plant structure. Magnolia flowers have many, separate, spirally-arranged parts (petals/sepals, stamens, pistils); superior ovaries; and the stamens (the pollen-bearing part of the flower) are not well differentiated into an-

thers and filaments.

Planting native plants, like sweetbay magnolia, has the added benefit of helping to support native wildlife food webs. The leaves of sweetbay magnolia (and also tulip-tree) are food for the caterpillars of the beautiful tiger swallowtail butterfly.

On the campus of Delaware State University, the Claude E. Phillips Herbarium is Delaware's center for research, education, and outreach about plant identifications, locations, and uses. Call 857-6452 (Dr. Susan Yost, Herbarium Educator) to arrange a tour of the herbarium, or for more information about this article.