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Not all Magnolias are Big Evergreen Trees from the South

Michelle Le Strange , UC Master Gardener Advisor

Say the words "magnolia tree" and many conjure up the vision of a white southern mansion with plenty of rural property. While most of our native magnolias come from the southeastern states, there are plenty more species and cultivars available for use in today's landscapes. About 30 species are grown worldwide, along with countless cultivars and hybrids.

Most of the cultivated forms are "precocious," i.e., having flowers that appear in spring before the leaves emerge. Also most cultivated magnolias produce a hugely flamboyant display of color and fragrance early in the year. Flower colors include all shades of purple pink to almost red, cream, and white. A few varieties sport yellow blooms.

Other deciduous forms and the more subtle evergreen species are summer-blooming, producing fragrant flowers set off by lustrous foliage. With selections ranging in size from 8 foot shrubs to 100-foot trees, and habits ranging from broad and spreading to upright and columnar, there is a magnolia available for use in almost any situation in any size yard.

New varieties and hybrids of magnolias appear every year, but distribution is spotty in local nurseries. Many more are available from mail order specialists. To help you choose just the right magnolia for your own situation, here are some proven performers.

Evergreen magnolias. The true southern magnolia, M. grandiflora is a large evergreen tree that has dark, glossy green leaves with brown undersurfaces. Flowers may reach a foot in diameter and are intensely fragrant. These trees can take the heat and tolerate damp soil, however many complain about their mess. This tree needs space to drop its big leathery leaves, seed pods, and litter from late spring through autumn. A better option is 'Little Gem', a dwarf form with flowers and leaves that are smaller than the original. It eventually reaches 15-20 feet and makes a nice small tree.

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Deciduous magnolias with saucer flowers. The most commonly cultivated magnolia throughout the United States is the hybrid saucer magnolia (M.x soulangiana), often called tulip trees because of the shape and bright colors of their flowers. These small trees (slow growing to 25' height) become focal points in the spring landscape. Common cultivars in this area are 'Alexandrina', 'Burgundy', and 'Lilliputian.'

The yulan (M. denudate) and lily magnolia (M. liliiflora) are also in this group. The yulan is taller and the lily is smaller than the saucer magnolia. Both tend to be shrubby in shape; the yulan does well in Southern California, while the lily magnolia provides a strong vertical effect in big flower borders.

All can take our cold winters, but their spring bloom can be nipped back by frost. They can also tolerate our hot summers, but perform better with some afternoon shade and out of the wind. Good soil drainage is preferred to slow draining alkaline soils.

Deciduous magnolias with star flowers. The petals of the star magnolia flowers (M. stellata) are strapped shape, more numerous than the saucer magnolias, and are aptly named because they resemble stars. 'Royal Star' has large, fragrant white star-like double flowers, 'Centennial' has tinges of pink in the white petals, and 'Rosea' is pink in bloom. Similar to the saucer magnolias, the saucer magnolias makes a great multi-trunk small tree. All are hardy, relatively slow growing, early-blooming plants with wide climatic adaptability.

Hybrids galore. Several hybrids resulting from breeding programs have become proven performers. 'Galaxy' is an upright tree 30 feet tall with reddish-purple flowers 8-10 inches across. A series known as the "Eight Little Girls" (or the M. Kosar-de Vos hybrids) resulted from crosses between the star magnolia and the purple-flowered M. liliiflora. This series includes 'Ann', 'Betty', 'Jane', 'Judy', 'Pinkie', 'Ricki', 'Randy', and 'Susan'. These become large. 15-20 foot shrubs that produce reddish-purple or pinkish flowers just before the leaves emerge. 'Randy' is available around here and it displays a profusion of star-shaped blooms later and longer than many other star magnolias. The outer surfaces of the petals are reddish-purple, with a white interior. Other well known hybrids include 'Leonard Messel', 'Merrill', and 'Spring Snow'. 'Royal Crown' is one of many popular hybrids bred by the late Ted Gresham of Santa Cruz.

Plant your magnolia today. The best time to plant or transplant magnolias is while they are dormant, but container

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