

# *Magnolia virginiana* sweet bay magnolia

Most people are familiar with the showy Asian magnolias that bloom in April before their leaves appear, but are surprised to learn about native North American magnolias. The North American species bloom later, after the leaves emerge.

The magnolia native to Massachusetts is *Magnolia virginiana* (sweet bay magnolia).

Its creamy white flowers are considered by many to be the most fragrant of all magnolias. Unlike the short bloom time of the Asian magnolias, sweet bay magnolias usually bloom throughout the month of July. This difference in timing of bloom reflects the different climates: spring in temperate Asia progresses without severe frosts, North American springs are often punctuated with late frosts.

Most of the trees in the Arboretum were planted according to the Bentham and Hooker sequence, the predominant plant classification of the time. Experts believe the oldest magnolia fossils are about one hundred million years old, making the magnolia one of the oldest flowering plants. Many of the Arboretum's magnolia trees are therefore located close to the entrance, as this system considers them to be one of the most primitive flowering plants.



Illustration No.4 by Peter Brown, c. 1760s. Held in the Botany Library at the Natural History Museum, London

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The sweet bay magnolia is a small tree that grows well in wet or even swampy soils near the coast and along streams. There are several different forms of the sweet bay magnolia here at the Arboretum. Some are multi-stemmed and some have single trunks; some keep their leaves all winter and others are deciduous; some were collected from the wild in Massachusetts and others come from farther south.

## Other American magnolias you might find blooming in July at the Arboretum:

### Cucumber tree (*Magnolia acuminata*)

The largest of all magnolia trees. Over the summer, its yellow flowers turn into cylindrical fruits that look like tiny cucumbers. The fruits develop a pinkish tint when they ripen, and split open to expose red seeds.



### Southern magnolia (*Magnolia grandiflora*)

Barely hardy in Boston. It is much better suited to warmer areas south of New York and in the western US.



### Big-leaf magnolia (*Magnolia macrophylla*)

As the name implies, has the largest undivided leaves of any native magnolia.



## Did you know?

- \* The northernmost colony of magnolias native to the United States (*Magnolia virginiana*) can be found growing in the small village of Magnolia in Gloucester, MA. The sweet bay magnolia swamp has been a unique botanical shrine since its discovery in 1806. Henry David Thoreau was even known to have visited.
- \* Magnolias are named after French botanist Pierre Magnol (1638 - 1715) from Montpellier, France.
- \* One of the oldest nicknames for Houston, Texas is “The Magnolia City” due to an abundance of magnolias growing along Buffalo Bayou.