

Magnolia x thompsoniana 'Cairn Croft'

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M*agnolia x thompsoniana* 'Cairn Croft' is the reincarnation of a very old hybrid. Indeed, the sweetly scented *M. x thompsoniana* was the first hybrid magnolia to be described in the Western horticultural literature, in 1820, beating *M. x soulangeana* into press by seven years. The original *M. x thompsoniana* selection was discovered in 1808 by Archibald Thomson among a flat of normal seedlings of the sweetbay, *M. virginiana*, which had germinated at his Mile End nursery in London, most likely from seed he collected from a plant growing in England. John Sims, writing in *Curtis' Botanical Magazine* twelve years later, described the plant as a robust, large-flowered variety of the sweetbay, to which he gave the name *M. glauca* var. *major*, and published a full-color illustration of its leaves and blossom (see inside front cover). In 1838, J. C. Loudon, in his monumental *Arboretum et Fructicetum Britannicum*, followed Sims' lead in classifying the plant as a variety of sweetbay magnolia "enlarged in all its parts," but changed its specific name to *thompsoniana*. He speculated that the plant might be a hybrid between *M. virginiana* and *M. tripetala* but left the question open. Thirty-eight years later a Dutch botanist, C. de Vos, followed up on Loudon's suggestion and formally reclassified the plant as the hybrid between *M. virginiana* and *M. tripetala*, retaining *M. x thompsoniana* as the name.

Despite its large, deliciously fragrant flowers, *Magnolia x thompsoniana* has achieved only modest popularity in European gardens since its introduction. This is partly because of its ungainly habit of growth, which makes it difficult to use in small or medium-sized gardens,

and partly because it does not seem to perform all that well under typical growing conditions. In the United States, the plant is less widely grown than it is in Europe, mainly because of its lack of winter hardiness. Indeed, the Arnold Arboretum's first director, C. S. Sargent, writing in *Garden and Forest* in 1888, noted that "it is a curious fact that it [*M. x thompsoniana*] is much less hardy and much less vigorous than either of its supposed parents, suffering here



The fully opened flower of Magnolia x thompsoniana 'Cairn Croft', roughly six inches across.

always, unless carefully protected in winter, and rarely rising above the size of a small bush."

In 1960, J. C. McDaniel, the well-known horticulturist and magnolia breeder at the University of Illinois, attempted to remedy the hardiness problem by recreating the hybrid using *Magnolia virginiana* parents that were hardier than the one that the original plant came from. His work culminated in 1966 with the introduction of 'Urbana', which had the greatest ornamental potential of all of the seed-

lings he raised and was hardy to minus-15 degrees F. Like its predecessor, however, 'Urbana' has never achieved anything other than limited distribution, and most nursery people who have grown the plant consider it a poor performer. In 2004 a third *M. x thompsoniana* cultivar, 'Olmenhof', was found growing in a public park in Belgium and was named and registered by Koen Camelbeke, Jef Van Meulder, and Wim Peeters. It is reported to have a better growth habit and earlier and larger flowers than the 1808 selection (Boland, 2005).

'Cairn Croft'

Magnolia x thompsoniana 'Cairn Croft' is the fourth reincarnation of this unusual hybrid. The plant was discovered on a private estate in Westwood, Massachusetts, about ten miles southwest of the Arboretum. It was one of a group of about a dozen specimens of sweetbay magnolia that had been purchased around 1989 from a nursery identified only as "southern." On June 22, 1998, the gardener for the estate, Kevin Doyle, stopped by the Arboretum's Dana Greenhouses with some cuttings (with flowers) of one of the seedlings that was strikingly different from its supposed siblings. One quick look was all it took to recognize the plant as a *M. x thompsoniana* hybrid, which I knew from the literature but had never seen.

Research in the library confirmed my initial diagnosis, and I immediately set about propagating the plant from the cuttings that Kevin had brought in by dipping the lower portion of their stems in an aqueous solution of K-IBA (5,000 parts per million) for five seconds and then placing them under fog and intermittent mist. Some six out of sixty-three cuttings were well rooted by the following April, two of which are now growing on the Arboretum's grounds (AA #174-98). The mother plant remains alive and well in its original Westwood home.

'Cairn Croft'—the name Kevin selected—produces flowers with a sweet, lemony fragrance that are two to three times larger than



The flowers of *Magnolia x thompsoniana* 'Cairn Croft' (left) next to those of a "sibling" *M. virginiana* (right).

those of the *Magnolia virginiana* seedlings that came in the same 1989 shipment. The plant is fully hardy in USDA zone 6 (minus-10 degrees F), where it has been growing without winter protection or damage since 1989. It is a fully deciduous plant, with pale green winter twigs and buds, not unlike those of *M. virginiana*. It produces relatively large, elliptical leaves, six to eight inches (16–21 cm) long by two to three-and-a-third inches (5–8.5 cm) wide with slightly undulating margins; they are a bright, shining green above and, due to a covering of fine hairs, silvery-white underneath. Like the original clone of *M. x thompsoniana*, the pith of its young twigs is incompletely septate while that of *M. virginiana* is completely septate and that of *M. tripetala* is continuous (Spongberg, 1976).

'Cairn Croft' produces flowers from mid June through July that stand erect on the ends of the branchlets on relatively stout, glaucous pedicels, not unlike those of its *Magnolia tripetala* parent. Typically the flowers have eleven tepals: the three outer ones are greenish-white in color, spatulate in shape, and reflex back as the flower opens. The eight inner tepals are thicker than the outer tepals, creamy white in color and oblong-ovate in shape. They are three to three-and-a-quarter-inch (7–9 cm) long and



The original plant of 'Cairn Croft' with its discoverer, Kevin Doyle, in 2002. It was fifteen feet tall, with a spread of seventeen feet.

less than an inch by an inch-and-a-third (2.2–3.5 cm) wide, and fade as they age to a “rusty yellow,” to use John Sims’ phrase. The flowers of ‘Cairn Croft’ are intermediate in size between its two parents, being roughly twice the size of *M. virginiana* and three-quarters the size of *M. tripetala*. Fortunately, in fragrance all of the *M. x thompsoniana* selections favor their sweetbay mothers rather than their “ill-scented” fathers.

The original ‘Cairn Croft’ is a vigorous grower, having reached a height of fifteen feet (4.6 m) with a spread of seventeen feet (5.2 m) by 2002, in the absence of any pruning. Despite its proximity to flowering specimens of *Magnolia virginiana*, ‘Cairn Croft’ does not set viable

seed. No doubt it suffers from same case of pollen sterility that was reported for the original *M. x thompsoniana* clone by Frank Santamour in 1966.

It is my hope that in ‘Cairn Croft’ we at last have a “home-grown” *Magnolia x thompsoniana* selection that can stand up to the rigors of the North American climate. For now I am assuming that ‘Cairn Croft’ originated from open-pollinated seed collected from a plant of *M. virginiana* and was the only hybrid among a group of seedlings that was true to its maternal parent. How accurate this assumption is awaits the results of DNA-testing, which is planned for later this year. Scions of ‘Cairn Croft’ were distributed to Pat McCracken (McCracken’s Nursery) and Dick Jaynes (Broken Arrow Nursery) in March of last year and, with luck, should be commercially available within a year or two.

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