



Magnolia 'Daphne'

The best yellow magnolias

Yellow magnolias have been available for 50 years and the range is slowly expanding. KOEN CAMELBEKE and MAURICE FOSTER, both experienced growers, select the best ten for gardens.

YELLOW-FLOWERED magnolias are a relatively unknown phenomenon to gardeners. *Magnolia* flower colour is essentially white, pink or purple. However, the first yellow-flowered *Magnolia* cultivar dates back around 40 years, to the mid 1970s. As the range of yellows has expanded, growers have published assessments of the best cultivars. But improved cultivars continue to be raised, and with some good ones being released as recently as 10 or 15 years ago, now is a good time for a further

assessment. In this article we highlight what we regard as the 10 best cultivars for general planting.

Origin of yellow

Yellow pigmentation in all *Magnolia* selections and hybrids derives from a single American species, *Magnolia acuminata*, or from its southern variety, *M. acuminata* var. *subcordata* (syn. *M. cordata*). Assertions that creamy yellow variants of *M. demodata* have played a role remain very dubious, and its possible influence is surely marginal.

Typical *M. acuminata* is a large tree with an upright, symmetrical crown, broadening with age. Its native range extends from western New York State, as far north as southern Ontario and south into Florida and Louisiana. It grows freely in UK conditions. A tree in Herefordshire recently measured by the Tree Register of the British Isles has reached 18m in height with a girth of 352cm at 1m from the ground. This is about average height, but taller specimens have been recorded in Cumbria, Gwynnedd, Surrey and

the *M. acuminata* characters of vigour, hardiness and late flowering.

Magnolia acuminata var. *subcordata* can be more shrubby in habit, or is sometimes a small tree. Because it is from the southern distribution of the species it is slightly less hardy and more vulnerable to late spring frosts than the species. This variety bears flowers in various shades of yellow, to sometimes even orange-yellow. A selection with rather pale yellow flowers, *M. acuminata* var. *subcordata* 'Miss Honeybee', is one of the most frequently planted. This has also been used successfully as a parent, with the aim of producing yellow-flowered hybrids of potentially more modest stature.

Magnolia acuminata is often self-incompatible and reluctant to set seed freely. It appears to be quite indiscriminate in its choice of sexual partners in other sections of the genus, having been successfully hybridized with *M. campbellii*, *M. cylindrica*, *M. denudata*, *M. kobus*, *M. x loebneri*, *M. liliiflora*, *M. x soulangeana*, *M. sprengeri* and *M. stellata*.

Hybrid history

The first interspecific crosses, *M. acuminata* x *M. liliiflora* 'Nigra', were made in about 1940 at the Brooklyn Botanic Garden in New York. These were subsequently named *M. x brooklynensis*. The parents were presumably chosen because the chances of compatibility were high, with each having the same number of chromosomes. They also have other morphological affinities and were then the only two species in section *Tulipastrum* of subgenus *Yulania*. *Magnolia acuminata* is now the only representative of subsection *Tulipastrum*, while *M. liliiflora* has been relocated to subsection *Yulania*.

Over the last 50 years or so more than 100 selections and hybrids of 'yellow' magnolia have been



Magnolia acuminata (left), here with Daphne Lippitt, for whom *Magnolia* 'Daphne' was named. The flowers of the same species are yellowish green (right). It is the favoured species for breeding programmes devoted to producing yellow-flowered hybrids.

Yorkshire. The biggest tree in Belgium has a girth of 450cm and is growing somewhat hidden in the Park of Laeken in Brussels.

The flowers are inconspicuous, relatively small, erect, no more than 7–10cm long, with nine narrow tepals that are usually not overlapping, and variable in colour with a suffusion of greens, yellows and even blues. An extraordinary

selection is *M. acuminata* 'Seiju', also known as the 'blue' magnolia.

The flowers of *M. acuminata* are borne with the leaves in May and June and, for the most part, are hidden by the foliage. Distinctive yellow variants have been found in the wild, and some of the best of these have been named and used for hybridizing. As well as aiming for yellow flowers, hybridists also value

Magnolia acuminata 'Seiju' has curious blue-tinged flowers





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Arboretum Wespelaar

Magnolia X brooklynensis 'Evamaria'



Magnolia 'Elizabeth'

listed. Too many have been named, many of not obvious garden value, not to say mediocre. A few have risen to the surface and survived the trial of time to become popular and commercially available.

Any assessment of the best in terms of beauty of flower can just be a matter of personal taste, tempered by experience in differing conditions. Depth of colour, for example, is said to be enhanced in favourable conditions of light and temperature. What might be a deep yellow in say the North Island of New Zealand could be much paler in cold Europe. Colour can also vary from year to year, depending on the weather.

The search continues for the perfect yellow *Magnolia*. It needs to have a compact habit; to flower freely; to flower precociously before the leaves appear, but late enough to escape frost; to have an intense yellow colour; and to have the poise and elegance of the blooms of *M. demudata*. We are not there yet, but the recent selections described below are getting close. They are arranged in approximate chronological order of release date.



Colour comparison of *Magnolia* 'Elizabeth' (left) and *Magnolia* 'Lois' (right)

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The 10 best cultivars 'Evamaria'

It may seem odd to start with a cultivar that only shows yellow inside the flower, but it is a beautiful plant that needs to be included in this selection. It was also the first selection of the cross to be named, and the type specimen of the hybrid is derived from it. It has broad-tipped, shapely flowers of pale magenta suffused with shades of yellow and green. This extraordinary combination of colours is unusual

and divides opinion, but we love it. It is a small tree, late-flowering, escapes frost, performs well in UK conditions, and does equally well on the Continent. It was patented in 1968 and registered as a cultivar with the Magnolia Society in 1970.

'Elizabeth'

It was also at Brooklyn Botanic Garden that the real yellow breakthrough was achieved. This was a cross between *M. acuminata* and *M. demudata*, yielding numerous



Magnolia 'Lois'



Magnolia 'Petit Chicon'

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late April and early May they also mostly escape the threat of late spring frost.

Some of these seedlings were of exceptional quality. The selection that was finally named was the now celebrated 'Elizabeth'. It has flowers of a beautiful creamy yellow; at the time a completely new and distinctive colour in the magnolia landscape. It represented a major step forward for horticulture and is still prized as one of the best cultivars for general planting. It is reliably hardy, easy to grow in most soils and, once established, indestructible. Its flowers, produced with great freedom, are intermediate between the parents. Although lacking the perfect symmetry of *M. demudata*, the flowers are of equal size to it.

The original plant was a large, upright, multi-stemmed shrub but 'Elizabeth' may be pruned to tree form if required, and can reach 12m in height after 22 years.

Its siting in the landscape, whether sheltered or in the open, has a significant influence on the final habit of the specimen. At Wespelaar Arboretum in Belgium and White House Farm in Kent we have noticed plants on their own roots, as opposed to grafted onto a rootstock, may be slower to start. However, they will grow faster and more vigorously and ultimately develop into larger, more upright ➤

seedlings. They produced late but precocious flowers of differing forms, in many shades of yellow, generally of a good size, shape and texture, and freely produced on vigorous, large, multi-stemmed shrubs and small to medium trees.

These yellow-flowered hybrids also bridged the gap between the fading pomp of the earlier, precocious flowers of sections *Yulania* and *Buergeria* and the later, summer flowers of sections *Oyama* and *Rhytidosperrum*. By flowering in



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specimens than those grafted onto *M. kobus*, the preferred rootstock in Europe.

'Elizabeth' is highly effective in the garden landscape. Where there is room for only one yellow magnolia it should be the first choice for planting anywhere in the UK and mainland Europe.

If you want to be the first to produce a yellow flower each year, then consider 'Petit Chicon'. It is very similar to 'Elizabeth' but flowers 6 to 10 days earlier. It is thus a reliable signal of the start of the yellow-flowered *Magnolia* season.

'Lois'

Further hybrids were made at Brooklyn Botanic Garden. Dr Lola Koerting back-crossed an excellent sibling (# 854) of 'Elizabeth' with *M. acuminata* and producing an outstanding selection designated #11/60. Its parentage is therefore one quarter *M. denudata* and three quarters *M. acuminata* and combines

some of the best qualities of both parents.

It was later named 'Lois' and bears clear, unfading, primrose-yellow flowers with nine broad tepals around 8–9cm long. Although smaller than those of 'Elizabeth', the flowers have a pleasing shape, reflecting something of its Chinese parent. A rooted cutting planted 25 years ago in 1990 in Kent is now a tree some 8m tall. It begins to flower precociously at the end of April, with the last flush of flowers coinciding with the emergence of the lettuce-green, young foliage. Last year each top extension shoot bore flower buds for the first time, so its upright, strong growth resembling that of *M. acuminata* is now likely to broaden out into a more rounded crown. The quality of its primrose yellow flowers, vigour, hardiness and neat, symmetrical habit all recommend it as an outstanding choice for any garden in the UK.

'Yellow Bird'

This hybrid was also bred at Brooklyn Botanic Garden, from a cross between *M. x brooklynensis* 'Evamaria' and *M. acuminata* var. *subcordata*, and registered in 1981. Together with 'Daphne', and some other more recent selections from Wespelaar Arboretum, this is the most intense, deep yellow-flowered one yet produced. The flowers are quite small, with an upright, compact, tulip shape which they hold to maturity. They appear with and after the leaves. Because of this timing the impact is not as dramatic as with the precocious cultivars, but the strong colour compensates for this.

Generally with yellow magnolias, intensity of yellow and smaller flower size correlate with flowers emerging in May, and the foliage is influenced by *M. acuminata*. The converse applies to those flowering precociously, with larger but paler flowers, influenced by parents of subsection *Yulania*.

Siting is important, and to get the best effect, 'Yellow Bird' should be grown as an isolated specimen to ensure that all the flowers are visible. Grown in light woodland, or with close companions where the tree is drawn up or enclosed, the flowers are not visible from below, being hidden in the foliage like *M. acuminata*. It is a small tree with a neat, round canopy and thus ideal for a lawn specimen. A tree planted in the open at Wespelaar Arboretum in 1988 has grown into a lovely, eye-catching individual and the habit resembles that of an old crab apple.

'Daphne'

This cultivar is certainly the best of the late-flowering ones that are of an intense yellow and that flower with the leaves. It was raised at Wespelaar Arboretum from seed provided by US plant scientist and *Magnolia*

breeder Dr August Kehr. The seed was from a cross between *M. acuminata* var. *subcordata* 'Miss Honeybee' and *M. 'Gold Crown'* (*M. acuminata* x *M. denudata*) x *M. x brooklynensis*). It has a neat, dense, compact, erect habit and the upright flowers are held predominantly at the tips of the branches, where they are not obscured by foliage. It was named for Daphne Lippitt, partner of Philippe de Spoelberch, magnolia connoisseur and founder of

Wespelaar Arboretum in Belgium.

As with 'Yellow Bird', siting is important and this cultivar warrants individual treatment. Its neat habit and deep colour make it ideal as a specimen for the limited space of a front lawn or perhaps even a large container in a sunny courtyard.

'Yellow Lantern'

The elongated, tapering, lemony cream flowers of this cultivar are freely borne in late April. It is a stout, small, upright tree. For large

flowers, they are notably weather resistant and maintain their pleasing, upright shape until they shatter.

From a cross between *M. acuminata* var. *subcordata* 'Miss Honeybee' and *M. x soulangeana* 'Big Pink' (then known as 'Alexandrina'), this cultivar was raised by Phil Savage, a prolific *Magnolia* breeder based in Michigan.

It is very amenable to pruning to a single stem, and after 10 years typically reaches about 5m.

'Gold Star'

Another excellent Phil Savage cross, from its parentage (*M. acuminata* var. *subcordata* 'Miss Honeybee' x *M. stellata* 'Rubra') one could reasonably assume that this would be a shrubby plant of moderate proportions. In fact it really wants to be arboreal and grows freely and quickly into a good sized, open tree. This should be taken into account when siting it.

'Gold Star' bears typical *M. stellata* flowers with about 14 strap-shaped tepals. These are precocious, appearing well before the leaves in early April, and thus the overall effect is very attractive. The cultivar name is rather inappropriate as the flowers are a no less pleasing pale yellow rather than gold. However, this can be readily forgiven as 'Gold Star' represents a genuine breakthrough because it is a highly attractive, yellow *M. stellata*-type plant. It also inherits the hardiness of *M. stellata* and the flowers will even tolerate a touch of frost without being disfigured. It is a good choice for colder spots but regular frost pockets should be avoided.

'Butterbowl'

Although selected at Wespelaar Arboretum, 'Butterbowl' is the result of a cross made by August Kehr in 1992. He hybridized 'Yellow



Magnolia 'Yellow Lantern'

Merrill Hughes Jones / The Garden Collection

Bird' with 'Sundance', this last being *M. acuminata* × *M. denudata*.

'Butterbowl' is a healthy, hardy and floriferous tree with perfectly rounded flowers on a perfectly round tree. The relatively small flowers, around 6cm high, stand out as they precociously appear before the leaves. The six inner tepals have a good yellow colour, sometimes with rather vague, soft pink stripes from the *M. liliiflora* parent of 'Yellow Bird'. On warmer days they open fully and spread a soft, sweet scent somewhat reminiscent of papaya.

Depending on the season, flowering starts around the end of March and ends in mid to late May, with a peak around mid or late April. The flowering period generally lasts around five weeks, but in those rare years with perfect weather flowering can spread over 52 days.

'Honey Flower'

Also from August Kehr comes this small tree with an appealing, regularly shaped crown. It is a cross between *M. acuminata* var. *subcordata* 'Miss Honeybee' and 'Elizabeth'.

The deep yellow colour of the flowers resembles that of 'Honey Liz', a cultivar from the same cross with much larger but, unfortunately, floppy flowers. Moreover, the habit of 'Honey Liz' is rather irregular and somewhat untidy.

As with 'Butterbowl', the flowers of 'Honey Flower' are rather small, about 6.5cm high, but it is very floriferous and always has impact as a solitary tree. Follow-up and evaluation over the years has revealed that in yellow-flowered magnolias the intensity of the flower colour can vary from year to year, depending on different factors. 'Honey Flower', with its perfectly vase-shaped flowers, has more than once won the contest for deepest yellow flower in the orchard of



Magnolia 'Gold Star'



Magnolia 'Butterbowl'



Magnolia 'Honey Flower'

Arboretum Wespelaar

yellow-flowered magnolias at Wespelaar Arboretum. This is a surprise, as the competition is tough against usual winners such as 'Anilou', 'Daphne', 'Green Bee' or 'Honey Liz'.

'Anilou'

This cultivar deserves more attention and should be grown more frequently. It is the result of a cross between *M. acuminata* and 'Elizabeth'. The plant was named in 2004 in honour of the deceased youngest sister of Philippe de Spoelberch.

An upright tree, it has erect, deep yellow flowers with nine tepals which appear more or less with the leaves. The outer tepals have shades of green but are not sepaloid. It flowers for more than a month, starting around mid April and ending in late May, with a flowering peak in late April or early May.

Awarded plants

In 2013 the RHS published a revised list of Award of Garden Merit (AGM) plants. The AGM is given to first-rate plants that are excellent for ordinary use in appropriate conditions, available, of good constitution, essentially stable in form and colour, and reasonably resistant to pests and diseases.

Of the 42 *Magnolia* with AGMs, only five have yellow flowers: 'Daphne', 'Elizabeth', 'Gold Star', 'Lois' and 'Yellow Lantern'. That is an excellent selection and most gardeners should find their plant of choice there.



Magnolia 'Anilou'

Arboretum Wespelaar

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