

# Magnolia denudata: yulan, the grandfather of magnolias

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## Introduction

One of the greatest events of early spring is to watch the emergence, progression, and efflorescence of *Magnolia denudata*, the yulan, or lily-tree magnolia. And although there are often invidious comparisons to later-blooming magnolias that escape spring frosts, the precociousness, floriferousness, and sheer beauty of yulan make it worthy of its long-standing fame. Yulan magnolia can be considered the ‘grandfather of magnolias’, not only because of its extensive history of cultivation and its extreme longevity, but also because of its importance as a parent of *Magnolia ×soulangeana* along with numerous other magnolia cultivars.

In *Garden and Forest* William Goldring aptly described the beauty of *Magnolia denudata*, known as *M. conspicua* throughout the 19th century, writing that:

Just past [flowering] is the glorious Yulan (*Magnolia conspicua*), which has been the attraction of many a garden, and this year, owing to the lateness of the season, it has been more beautiful than ever, having escaped the late frosts and cold winds. Of the several forms of it there is none to equal in purity the snow-white form, whose flowers have not the faintest trace of colour. A large mass of this was exhibited at the Royal Horticultural Society a short time ago, and though surrounded by the rarest and showiest Orchids and other plants, everyone who saw them was captivated by their chaste beauty. (Goldring 1888)

“Chaste beauty” indeed – an apt description, with those who have grown yulan magnolia remarking on this for centuries, so much so that in China the flowers traditionally have been a symbol of candor and purity. Its white flowers, variously described as clear white, ivory, or the color of rich cream, make a remarkable show in early spring, well before the leaves emerge and before many other magnolias have come onto the spring stage.

*Magnolia denudata* is native to central China, growing in forests from 500–1,000m in Anhui, Chongqing, northern Guangdong, Guizhou, Hubei, Hunan, Jiangxi, Shaanxi, Yunnan, and Zhejiang provinces (Xia et al. 2008), with the IUCN conservation status of Least Concern (Rivers et al. 2016). And although native to these provinces, it is cultivated throughout a much wider area in China as well as around the world.

It is often written, and a fact universally repeated that yulan has been cultivated since the early 7th century Tang Dynasty, with many authors listing the year 627 as its date of introduction. I have often wondered about the source of this information (and date) because it is cited by nearly every author



*Magnolia denudata* in flower at the China National Botanical Garden, Beijing.

since the early 1800s. The information about the Tang Dynasty appears to have originated in the writings of the French Jesuit missionary, Pierre-Martial Cibot, who served in China from 1759 until his death in 1780; Cibot wrote about its history, art, and natural history in “*Mémoires concernant l’histoire, les sciences, les arts, les mœurs, les usages, etc., des Chinois: par les missionnaires de Pékin*” (Catholic Encyclopedia 2023). It is worth including his full quote because this information is quoted (often verbatim) by almost all authors who have written about yulan since:

As far as we know, the Yu-lan was first cultivated during the Tang dynasty which began in 627. Since this dynasty he has always held a rank distinguished in the gardens of our Emperors. The Ming, who transported the Court to Peking, took there this beautiful tree of the Southern Provinces. (Cibot 1778)

Cibot’s use of 627 as the starting date of the Tang Dynasty is confusing because this dynasty is generally listed as starting in 618 (Britannica 2023). Perhaps Cibot was off by one year and was referring to the beginning of the reign of the second Tang emperor, Li Shimin, known by the temple name Taizong, who succeeded to the throne in 626 by murdering two brothers and forcing the abdication of his father, but he became one of the greatest emperors China has known (Britannica 2023). Whether this discrepancy in dates has to do with 18th century historical records or some unknown source remains unclear.



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Left: square vase with black ground, Chinese, Qing Dynasty  
 Above: Wang Shi, *Magnolia Blossoms*, from the *Mustard Seed Garden Manual of Painting*. 18th century. Detroit Institute of Arts, Founders Society Purchase, Mary R. Coyle Fund, 37.78

Hui-Lin Li (1959) wrote that yulan is widely planted throughout China, and that the ancient, huge, gnarled specimens in gardens and temple grounds are deeply cherished. He also mentions that as a symbol of purity yulan has been portrayed in paintings, fabrics, and ceramics for centuries. George Forrest states that yulan, along with other magnolia species, were often seen surrounding many of the larger temples and guild-houses, and goes on to describe, “one of the most charming effects I can remember, is of an avenue of exceedingly well grown trees of *M. conspicua* in the grounds of one of the larger guild-houses of Yungchang-fu” in Yunnan (modern-day Baoshan; Forrest 1927). Forrest also mentions Chinese monks visiting Japan during the Tang Dynasty and earlier for proselytizing and brought along many of their favorite ornamental plants (Forrest 1927).

Art truly does imitate life in the expression of the beauty of the yulan flowers shown in many different media. The depictions of yulan flowers are numerous, and one of the earliest and most charming of these is held by the National Palace Museum, Taiwan; titled *Wealth and Rank in Halls of Jade*, by Xu Xi, a famous flower and bird painter of the 10th century in the Southern Tang Dynasty, it is an astonishing depiction that includes yulan, mume, and peonies. Another remarkable piece from the National Palace Museum is a Ming Dynasty jade flower holder in the shape of a magnolia blossom, a fitting tribute as ‘yulan’ is often translated as ‘jade orchid’ (Li 1959). One of my favorite illustrations of yulan is from the *Mustard Seed Garden Manual of Painting*, a

work that was intended to demonstrate ways of illustrating flowers in artwork. Earlier this year while visiting the Frick Collection in Manhattan, I was dumbstruck by the striking images of yulan magnolia on 19th century Chinese vases among their ceramics display.

### Nomenclatural status

*Magnolia denudata* has had numerous botanical names over the course of the past 200-plus years with the history of its name and synonymy convoluted (at best). Following current convention the preferred name is *Magnolia denudata*, in contrast to *Magnolia heptapeta*. Additionally, the name *Magnolia conspicua* is often used throughout the late 18th and 19th-century literature. For more detailed descriptions of the history of name changes, it is worth looking at Rehder and Wilson (1913), Johnstone (1955), or Callaway (1994), or for a contrasting opinion, see Treseder (1978). Briefly summarized, the debate hinges on whether the older synonym *M. heptapeta* (based on *Lassonia heptapeta* Buc’hoz) should be rejected since its type was a mere artistic impression of the species (Sutton 2022; Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew 2021). A thorough argument in favor of *M. denudata* was provided in Meyer & McClintock in *Taxon* (1987). Defending the use of *M. denudata*, Forrest commented that, “It seems a pity... [that] this species which has been so long known in gardens as *M. conspicua*, should have to be superseded by *M. denudata*, which only antedates it by a short period. However, the law of priority is a good and fast one, and we must abide by it” (Forrest, in Millais 1927).

### History of introduction into western gardens

The first description of *Magnolia denudata* in Western literature was from Engelbert Kaempfer’s *Amoenitatum exoticarum politico-physico-mediarum* (1712) where Kaempfer used the Japanese plant name and briefly described, “Mokkwuren, flore albo, novem plerumque petalis inordinate” or, mokkwuren, a white flower, with nine mostly disordered petals.



Xu Xi, *Wealth and Rank in Halls of Jade*. 10th century

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In Cibot's description (Cibot 1778), he continues with fascinating insights into the cultural significance and uses of yulan in Chinese society, writing that,

The flowers that crown all the branches make it a spectacle & spread far and wide the sweetest smell they bloom almost all at the same time & only last a few days. For any crop, it only requires being planted in the shelter of the north and watered in spring. The flowers are placed in boxes like the orange trees in France. ... When it has shed its leaves, the florists remove it to a greenhouse, and by accelerating its growth by means of a stove, they have it in flower in the first days of the new year to adorn the guest rooms and the women's apartments.

The gardeners of the Palace thus raise a good number of them and the governors of the Southern Provinces send them every year, to be offered to the Emperor and adorn the apartments of His Majesty. The beautiful Yu-lan of the gardens of Peking & Yuenming-yuen, or Versailles of China, cannot resist the bitter cold of the long and rigorous winter, only because we take care to wrap the trunk and branches with thick strips of woven straw into which we sew strong mats. (Cibot 1788)

Later in his description of yulan, Cibot gives us the often-repeated line, that, "the Yulan in flower resembles a walnut tree whose branches ... are covered with beautiful lilies" (Cibot 1788).

By the late 1780s Chinese plants were beginning to trickle into the U.K., thanks largely to the agency of Joseph Banks and British merchants stationed in the Chinese port concessions. *M. denudata* was first brought to England sometime in the 1780s through John and Alexander Duncan, Scottish merchants of the British East Asia Company (Kilpatrick 2007). It took several attempts to successfully introduce it to British cultivation, as described by botanist, plant explorer, and author James Main, who wrote that,

Mr. Loudon, in the last number of his *Arboretum Britannicum*, says, that this plant was introduced by Sir Joseph Banks along with *Hydrangea Hortensia*, *Paeonia Moutan*, and *Rosa Indica*, about 1789. This is nearly correct; but the fact is, *M. conspicua* had been received both at Kew and Low Layton (where Mr. Slater's country seat then was) before, as well as immediately after that year; but the plants generally died from being sickly when received, and from being treated as stove plants after their arrival. (Main 1835)

As gardeners became more familiar with *Magnolia denudata* reports of the growth and cultural requirements continued throughout the early 19th century. Some of the early reports were not especially favorable, probably because yulan was treated as more of a hothouse plant than a hardy tree species. For example, in an often-quoted report in *Curtis's Botanical Magazine*, the author wrote that this:

Native of China, where we are told by the author of the above-quoted memoirs that it forms a pyramidal tree thirty or forty feet high; but with us it hitherto appears only as a straggling shrub, which blossoms freely before it arrives at any considerable size. The flowers are usually produced singly at the extremities of the branches, and for the most part fall off before the leaves make their appearance; and on this account it is far less agreeable to the eye than the *Magnolia grandiflora*, whose magnificent blossoms are beautifully contrasted, by being embosomed in large shining leaves. As most deciduous trees are less impatient of cold than those that are evergreen, it is not improbable but that the *Magnolia conspicua* may bear our winters in the open ground; but our springs are generally too rough to allow us to expect that the blossoms which appear so early in the year will arrive at tolerable perfection without shelter. (Sims 1814)

It seems that the authors undershot their expectations of yulan, comparing it to its North American counterpart, and not yet having the full knowledge of the magnificence of this species. A contrasting contemporary report to that in the botanical magazine was written by Aimé Bonpland, superintendent of Malmaison, the garden of Josephine Bonaparte, Empress of the French. Bonpland wrote that:

This plant is highly sought after by the Chinese, who cultivate it with great care to adorn the gardens and palaces of their sovereigns. *Magnolia yulan* [another synonym] has been cultivated in Malmaison since 1806. This establishment has long owned this plant alone; but for three years we have started to spread it in our various gardens. ... and each year they are covered with flowers towards the end of the month of March and the first days of April. These shrubs, which today have twelve feet, withstood the harsh cold of 1813 and 1814, although they were only covered by a glass cage covered with doormats. *Magnolia yulan* deserves the attention of growers and plant lovers, for the beauty of its flowers, which are of a delicate white, for the delicious odor that they exhale, and for the magnificence of its foliage, which hardly develops until near flowering. (Bonpland 1813)

Bonpland continues, giving a glimpse of insight into the world of plant distribution in the early 1800s, writing that, "I don't think you can get any ripe fruit from this *Magnolia* in our climate; but I hope that in a few years we will have one in Milan, in the gardens of Montza [sic], where I sent a very beautiful plant of this plant, there already more than two years". Along with his descriptions, this work on plants of Malmaison contains an elegant plate of *M. denudata* by Pierre-Joseph Redouté.

Comments of subsequent authors from the 1800s show the evolution of opinions and as gardeners became more familiar with this species, their opinions became increasingly favorable. It is also worth keeping in mind



that during this period the magnolias known in cultivation were the American species along with *M. denudata* and *M. liliiflora*. All of this was taking place before the introduction of any Japanese or other Chinese species, and even before the first introductions of *M. ×soulangeana*.

In 1822 Sir Abraham Hume gave an account to the Horticultural Society of London of a "*Magnolia conspicua* ... at this time in full blossom in his garden at Wormleybury, in Hertfordshire. It is trained to a south wall, fourteen feet high; ... the number of flowers upon it, nearly all of which were fully expanded when counted, were nine hundred and fifty-six, and they were throughout of considerable size. The tree was planted, where it now grows, in the year 1801, [and] has, at all times, borne its exposure abroad without injury, though it had not blossomed so abundantly and vigorously before" (Hume 1822).

More than a decade later James Main provided further insight into the state of yulan in England writing that, "One of the finest specimens of this highly ornamental Chinese plant is now (5th April) in flower in Messrs. Malcolm and Co.'s nursery at Kensington. It is **one of the first that was in the trade**, and originally planted where it now stands, as a stool to propagate from, but has been allowed to grow up into a fine spreading bush. It now bears, by computation, two thousand flowers; and is, by far, the most conspicuous object, not only in that nursery, but of all the vegetable products of the country round" (Main 1835; author's emphasis added). It is fascinating that these authors were so entranced by the beauty and quantity of flowers that they took the time to count (956) or estimate (2000) their numbers on these trees.

A few years later, John Loudon provided extensive comments about *M. denudata* in his *Arboretum et Fruticetum Britannicum*, some of which are worth including here. Loudon wrote that,

The tree was introduced into England by Sir Joseph Banks in 1789 [sic]; but it was many years before it attracted much attention, being considered as requiring a green-house or conservatory. ... Within the last twelve years, it has been discovered to be nearly as hardy as the American species, and it is now most extensively cultivated in the nurseries, both in Britain and on the Continent, and finds a place in every collection.

Against a wall, the tree shows itself in its greatest beauty; ... the tree has a fine effect planted in front of a bank of evergreens; and, indeed, wherever it is

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Opposite: *Magnolia denudata* at the Tyler Arboretum, dating to the mid-19th century.

Left: yulan in its full-flower glory at Morris Arboretum, showing its classic shape and color.

Below: *Magnolia denudata* (NACPEC18-020) fruit, collected in Wufeng County, Hubei Province, China.



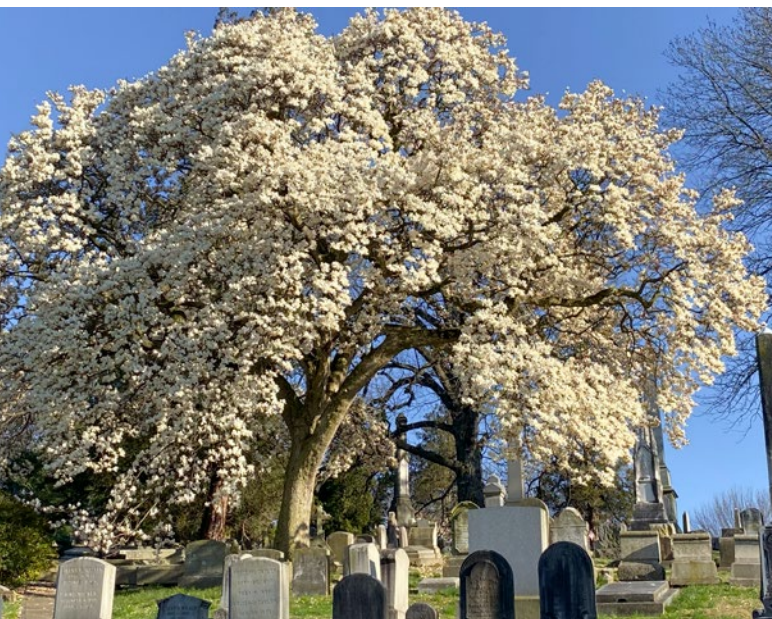
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planted, evergreens should be placed near it, and, if possible, so as to form a background, on account of the flowers expanding before the tree is furnished with any leaves.

An original imported plant, against a wall at Wormleybury, measured, in April, 1835, 27 ft. high, covered a space laterally of 24 ft., and had on it, at that time, 5000 flowers. In the neighbourhood of Paris, the largest plant of *M. conspicua* is at Fromont. It measured, in 1835, 40 ft. high; and the circumference of the trunk, at 2 ft. from the ground, was more than 2 ft.; and the diameter of the space covered by the branches is 24 ft.; it flowers magnificently every year, at the end of March and beginning of April, and the odour of the flowers is perceived at a great distance. (Loudon 1838)

Meanwhile, across the Atlantic, some of the earliest instances of *M. denudata* being sold in the U.S. (as *M. conspicua*) include Prince Nurseries of Flushing, Queens, in their 1829 catalogue (Prince 1829) and Bartram's Garden and Nursery in 1836 (Carr 1836). It is interesting to see that, as in Europe, the parent species were available shortly before the horticultural hybrid arrived and surprising to see how early the species and their hybrid arrived in America. A few years later, at Laurel Hill Cemetery, a rural cemetery a few miles up the Schuylkill River from Bartram's Garden, *M. conspicua* occurs in their 1844 List of Principal Trees and Shrubs; it is listed as "The Yulan or Conspicuous-flowered Magnolia, called sometimes the Chandelier Tree", the last being a common name I have never seen elsewhere (Guide to Laurel Hill Cemetery 1844).





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An impressive specimen of yulan at Laurel Hill Cemetery, Philadelphia, PA (LH#635). A core sample revealed this tree to be at least 130 years old.

Thomas Meehan, a Kew graduate turned American nurseryman and prolific author (Aiello 2021), described yulan in *The American Handbook of Ornamental Trees*. Meehan had first trained at Bartram's Garden, and his *Handbook* was an homage to the arboreal legacy of the Philadelphia area, where he provided descriptions of trees cultivated and described superior examples encountered during his travels. Of yulan, he wrote that, "It is a native of China, where it is said to have been in cultivation over one thousand years; and well it deserves to be. Flowering in the greatest profusion, and at a season when there is nothing else in bloom, and these flowers, too, combining the fragrance of the lily with the beauty of the rose what can be more desirable? ... There are many fine specimens in the vicinity of the city" (Meehan 1853).

Robert Hogg, in his newsy and wonderfully titled *Journal of horticulture, cottage gardener, and home farmer: a chronicle of country pursuits and country life, including poultry, pigeon and bee-keeping*, provides this description, along with a beautiful etching:

It is just 100 years since the Chinese tree, known as the Yulan, was introduced to England. It is therefore entitled to a place amongst the older introductions from that interesting country. In large gardens around the metropolis the tree is fairly well known, but it is not so frequently seen in country gardens as might be expected when its claims are duly considered. It is one of the most ornamental early spring flowering trees in cultivation, and a good specimen

loaded with flowers **is a most beautiful object** at a time when there is little else to attract out of doors. (Hogg 1889; author's emphasis added)

Moving into the 20th century, a brief passage by Gertrude Jekyll in *Colour in the Garden*, speaks volumes when she writes that, "Now we pass among some shrub-clumps, and at the end come upon a cheering sight; a tree of *Magnolia conspicua* bearing hundreds of its great white cups of fragrant bloom" (Jekyll 1908).

In the First edition of *Trees and Shrubs Hardy in the British Isles* (Bean 1916), the author wrote that *M. denudata* is, "One of the most beautiful and striking of all flowering trees, this Magnolia is, unfortunately, an occasional victim to the inclemency of an English spring. It never fails to set an abundance of blossom, and the white flowers gleaming in the sunshine of an early spring day render it the most conspicuous of all trees at that season. It was for long an uncommon tree, the most famous specimens being at Kew, Syon, and Gunnersbury House."

Up until the early 20th century (and even continuing through today) most of the yulan magnolias in horticulture had come through cultivated sources and there have been relatively few wild collections. E.H. Wilson describes his impressions of seeing it in the wild:

The Yulan ... is authentically known to have been cultivated in China since about 618 a.d. ... It grows wild in moist woods in the central parts of China but this fact has only recently been made known. This form, however, is rare in a wild state and that most usually met has rosy or reddish-pink flowers. ... Both the white and coloured varieties of the Yulan are trees fifty feet tall, ... with a trunk eight feet in girth, and have ascending and spreading branches. Such trees I have seen in the forests of central China laden with thousands of flowers, and the spectacle they presented will never be forgotten. In western gardens examples of the white variety from twenty to twenty-five feet tall are known, and fine specimens are common in the gardens of eastern North America where the Yulan is a very popular tree. (Wilson 1917)

Wilson's herbarium collections are from Guling, Jiangxi Province, (numbers 1654 and 1654a) which the authors (rightly or not) consider the original home of the widely cultivated species (Rehder and Wilson 1913). Several Wilson images of *M. denudata* from his travels in China are available through the Arnold Arboretum archive. (Interestingly, Wilson corrects Cibot's 627 date and changes it to the beginning of the Ming Dynasty.)

Following World War II changes in horticultural fashion and the rise of ever more complex magnolia hybrids meant that *M. denudata* was often superseded by more modern cultivars. Despite this, Philip J. Savage, Jr, renowned magnolia breeder had wonderful things to say about *M. denudata*, writing that, "If the Flood came again, which [tree] would you carry into the Ark? I ... can answer that question without soul-searching. Up the gangplank of Ark II I would carry *Magnolia denudata*." (Savage 1974). The timeless beauty

and enduring allure of *M. denudata* led to the naming of numerous cultivars, some of them older, others more recent. The names used in this list of cultivars are based on *The Register of Magnolia Cultivars* (Lobdell 2021) and the Find a Plant website (Royal Horticultural Society 2024).

### Cultivars

'Banana' Flowers white, upright, curving slightly before opening fully, resembling a banana. Present only at a few U.S. botanical gardens.	'Benedetto' Flowers pale pink. Likely lost to cultivation.
'Double Diamond' Multitetal form imported from China. Flowers with 14-17 pure white tepals, = <i>M. denudata</i> 'Dubbel'.	'Elongata' Flowers pure white, tepals occasionally with tinge of purplish-pink at the base. Slightly larger than the type.
'Forrest's Pink' * Thought to originate from seed collected by George Forrest. Flowers clear, purple-pink, and likely with <i>M. ×soulangeana</i> parentage.	'Fragrant Cloud' ('Dan Xin') Flowers emerge reddish-pink, fading to cream and white.
'Gere' Selected by J. C. McDaniel from a cemetery in Urbana, IL. Flowers white, appearing at same time as later <i>M. ×soulangeana</i> .	'Ghost Ship' Late flowering, upright.
'Giubiasco' Popular cultivar. Propagules taken by Otto Eisenhut from a large <i>M. denudata</i> in Giubiasco, Switzerland.	'Jade Lamp' Chinese selection. Large pure white flowers, 3 reduced outer sepaloid tepals with creamy yellow base and green stripe.
'Lacey' Flowers white with pink spot and pink stripe on outside base of tepals. Large flowers, to 20cm diameter.	'Lamp' Flowers white, upright, curving slightly before opening fully, lamp-shaped. Present only at a few US botanical gardens.
'Late Clone' Flowers white. Presumably late-flowering. (syn.= 'Late Form')	'Minrose' or 'Minfor' FESTIROSE Lightly scented, lilac-pink flowers. Selected by Minier Professional Solutions in 1998.

'Moon Garden' Introduced by Louisiana Nursery, Opelousas, LA. Flowers pure white, fragrant.	'Purple Eye' * Flowers white with a purple flush on inside and outside of tepal base. Parentage long debated, possibly involving <i>M. ×soulangeana</i> .
'R. Veitch' Flowers larger, rounder than type. Shown by Colonel Stephenson Clarke, Borde Hill Garden, West Sussex, England.	'Sawada's Cream' Tepals of the opening flowers bright butter yellow. Fruits are profuse, bright crimson in color, with heavy seed set.
'Sawada's Pink' Slight pink tinge to flowers. Obtained by Phil Savage from nurseryman K. Sawada of Mobile, AL.	'Sleeping Beauty' ‡ A plant at Arboretum Wespelaar originated from John Gallagher as "a late flowering <i>denudata</i> ".
'Swarthmore Sentinel' From the Scott Arboretum, originating from the Beijing Botanical Garden. Narrow, upright habit. Flowers creamy white and prolific.	'Wada' Flowers smaller than type, similar to 'Pristine', but with the same number of tepals as <i>M. denudata</i> . Distinct from 'Wada's Japanese Clone'.
'Wada's Japanese Clone' Introduced by K. Wada, Hakoneye Nurseries, Japan. Flowers pure white, late season.	

\* Possibly better considered as *M. ×soulangeana*

‡ Fide Royal Horticultural Society and Koen Camelbeke (pers. comm.) and not as listed in *Register of Magnolia Cultivars*.

### Notable Specimens

Unlike most other previous Trees of the Year, *Magnolia denudata* is a relatively common garden plant, so it would be difficult if not impossible to include a comprehensive list of all specimens found in cultivation. Instead, this list is meant to be illustrative and largely represents specimens that I have seen on my travels, along with some notable specimens described by colleagues. No offence is intended to any reader who knows of or grows equally impressive trees. Rather, I would be happy to hear from those readers about their favorite yulan magnolias. These descriptions are meant to represent the wide range and plasticity of the species, which can be grown on both coasts of the U.S. and well into the Midwest, in Ontario and British Columbia, Canada, across much of Europe, throughout China, Australia, and in New Zealand. As an indication of the widespread use and admiration of *M. denudata*, the BGCI Plant Search shows it growing in 134 gardens (BGCI 2023).



## UNITED STATES

Some of the northernmost trees that I am aware of in the United States occur in and around Boston, Massachusetts. The most notable of these is a well-known specimen just across from the Boston Public Garden, growing alongside a stately townhome at 1 Commonwealth (12 Arlington), at the northwest corner of Commonwealth Avenue and Arlington Street. This tree reaches the third story of the house, so is about 30 feet tall (10m), with an equal spread. An historic photo by Arthur Marr taken between 1930 and 1932 shows this tree in place and already of substantial size, meaning that this tree is more than 100 years old. Stephanie Fletcher of the Garden Club of the Back Bay reported fruit on the tree this year, a rare occasion for any yulan, because the flowers are typically frozen in most years.

At the Arnold Arboretum of Harvard University there are three trees grown from seed received in 1984 from a hotel garden in Beijing (AA #1165-84). These trees are upwards of 8m tall, although not the most vigorous specimens in the Arboretum, likely a sign of the heat island effect of central Boston compared to the temperatures in Jamaica Plain.

In the U.S., many of the oldest and most impressive trees are often found at our historic cemeteries, most of which were founded in the mid-1800s as part of the rural cemetery movement. For example, there are several notable



Yulan on Commonwealth Avenue, Boston. Photo taken by Arthur Marr, between 1930 and 1932. This tree is still alive, and is probably more than 100 years old.



Yulan on Commonwealth Avenue, Boston. Same tree as pictured opposite, photo taken in 2022.

specimens at The Green-Wood Cemetery in Brooklyn, New York, with dbh's of 51 cm, 64 cm, and 74 cm. Here, in Philadelphia, some of the oldest known trees are at Laurel Hill Cemetery. Core samples taken with Aaron Greenberg showed that one of these trees was 120+ years old (LH# 798; dbh=69 cm) and a second was 130+ years old (LH#635; dbh=61 cm)! These trees show no signs of declining and continue to have vigorous growth and remarkable flowering every spring. Based on the size of these trees, it is likely that those at Green-Wood are about the same age (see photo on p.26).



Probably the oldest tree in the Philadelphia area is at the Tyler Arboretum, in Media, PA. At some point in its long life this tree lost a significant trunk and is partly shaded by adjacent trees, but likely dates to the mid-19th century arboretum of brothers Minshall and Jacob Painter. Planting records show that this tree possibly came from John Evans, a well-known mid-19th century Philadelphia botanist.

At Longwood Gardens, two specimens (L-0405\*B and 1992-1047\*A) flank the Flower Garden Walk, with nearly perfect ovate crowns, and when in flower these provide a remarkable backdrop to the early spring bulb displays. At Winterthur, another an old specimen (19XX 2420) graces the lawn above the museum and provides an incredible blast of white in comparison to the March Bank.

Several remarkable specimens can be found at Dumbarton Oaks, Washington D.C. With plenty of character, but clearly in the 'veteran' stage of its life, a tree that the staff refer to as "The Bride" is remarkable for its age and tenacity. This plant is growing in front of their Orangery and is thought to predate Beatrix Farrand's early 20th century garden design. Also at Dumbarton Oaks is their majestic specimen of 'Purple Eye', a towering tree that flowers later than most yulan and coincides with the star and saucer magnolias and the early flowering cherries, making a scene well worth an early spring visit. Adjacent to Dumbarton Oaks is Oak Hill Cemetery, another mid-19th century rural cemetery, which has several old and handsome yulan magnolias throughout its landscape.

One of the oldest and most famous *Magnolia denudata* in the U.S. is on the campus of the University of Virginia, in Charlottesville. According to Richard Hopkins, Associate Director of Grounds, ten years ago its trunk was measured at 89 cm dbh. The planting date is unknown, but it does appear on maps created around 1860 so it is at least 163 years old.

Over the past 30 years, there have been two North America-China Plant Exploration Consortium (NACPEC) collections. The first (Cui 3051) was collected in 1994 at Xi'an Transport University from a tree that was considered to have exceptionally large flowers. There is one plant of this collection at the Morris Arboretum (Philadelphia) and at the Dawes Arboretum (Newark, OH), but because these were grown from open-pollinated seed, neither of them seems to have unusually large flowers. And, on the most recent NACPEC expedition to China in 2018, *M. denudata* seed was collected in Wufeng County, Hubei province, from cultivated specimens originally from higher in the mountains. Seedlings of this collection (NACPEC18-020) are growing at several arboreta and gardens in the U.S.

Close to the Morris Arboretum, in a small park in the Chestnut Hill neighborhood of Philadelphia, is a chimeric *Magnolia denudata/salicifolia*; this tree (or trees) is approximately 10 meters tall and slightly broader, with one set of trunks yulan magnolia and the other half willow magnolia. This strange

A magnificent old yulan at the University of Virginia is most likely the oldest known tree in the USA.



plant is probably well over 60 years old and either the result of vigorous understock or of two seedlings inadvertently growing together.

According to Matt Lobdell, there are two nice *M. denudata* at the Missouri Botanical Garden. One is an older specimen outside the bulb garden, the other is more in the 30-year range in the China garden. It is a nice plant though still a bit spindly. Both perform quite well, though as is typical for *M. denudata*, it will melt under even a light frost.

According to Kris Bachtell at the Morton Arboretum (Lisle, IL), their oldest tree (216-37) originated from Henry Kohankie and Son Nursery, Painseville, OH. This specimen falls into a category of plants that I refer to as "not thriving but not dying". Regardless, a nearly 100-year-old plant that has withstood the continental climate of suburban Chicago is testimony to the durability of *M. denudata*. Fortunately this old lineage has been propagated and that resulted in a much more vigorous plant (449-83).

Michael Wenzel of the Sonoma Botanical Garden reports that they have five accessioned trees, with the oldest and most spectacular from a Shanghai Botanical Garden *Index Seminum*, wild collected seed from Zhejiang Province in 1993 and planted in 1994. Three trees are from the early 2000s from the Magnolia Society and one tree is from seed from China National Tree Seed Corp. in February of 2005. Michael reports that, "the largest has always been very floriferous, the others more sparsely so, even considering their age, with proximity of neighboring plants also being a factor"; but even in their climate, in four out of ten springs they are not cut short by cold.

#### EUROPE

In the U.K., the Tree Register (Tree Register 2023) lists 34 trees, with the girthiest of these at RBG Kew (#1969.18381; 59 cm dbh) followed closely by a





Above: chimeric yulan, *Magnolia denudata* (left), with willow or anise magnolia, *M. salicifolia* (right), Chestnut Hill, Philadelphia.

tree at Wrest Park, Bedfordshire (59 cm dbh). The tallest tree in the U.K. is at Pencarrow, Cornwall (15.0 m) followed closely by a tree at Windsor Great Park (14.5 m).

Maurice Foster describes a *M. denudata* collected by Keith Rushforth on the Moganshan in Zhejiang that is likely an *ex situ* tree rather than wild, of medium size up to 12 m. Maurice writes that the “flower has beautiful balance and poise” and must be a good yulan, with no trace of pink. Continuing, Maurice reports that there are yellow-flowered *M. denudata* around China and he saw a plant at an old nursery in Sichuan that was daffodil yellow in bud, fading eventually to a mature yellowish-cream.

Philippe de Spoelberch wrote to say that most plants at Arboretum Wespelaar, Belgium are low broad shrubs. One plant in particular called “*M. denudata* (late form)” which came from Spinners Nurseries is a good clean white but not my typical flower shape and it is growing broader than high in their cool maritime climate. Koen Camelbeke from Wespelaar agrees, writing that it is not a good plant in their (Belgian) climate, and they have lost many and those that remain have split bark. Koen also mentions that yulan “is the perfect thermometer: -0.01°C and the flowers are damaged”.

Perhaps the best known tree in Europe is one in the small town of Giubiasco in southern Switzerland where this 150–170-year-old *M. denudata* can be found in a villa garden just off the main street (Jim Gardiner, pers. comm.).

This original tree is commercially available and has been propagated by the Swiss Eisenhut nursery.

Guido Piacenza, IDS member from Pollone in Piedmont, Italy reports that specimens are still growing in the gardens around the Lombardy lakes from the 19th century, although now it is seldom propagated. At his home garden, he has a yulan that is likely 100 years old, and about 10 meters high.

## CHINA

It is somewhat embarrassing that there isn't more to report from gardens in China, home to our Tree of the Year. Kang Wang of the China National Botanical Garden, Beijing, reports of the large number of yulans planted throughout their gardens, and the interest of their visitors when these are in flower after the long Beijing winter. Kang also writes to say that there is a 300-year-old tree at the Dajue Temple, which is located at the southern foot of Balcony Mountain (Yangtai Mountain) in the western suburbs of Beijing. Even more impressive is a 500-year-old specimen from the Ming Dynasty at Tianzhu Faxi Temple, in Hangzhou, Zhejiang Province.

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## Tree of the Year 2024

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