

The Plantsman's Choice

# *Magnolia stellata*

A large shrub or small multi-stemmed tree that welcomes the spring

Henrik Sjöman and Andrew Hiron

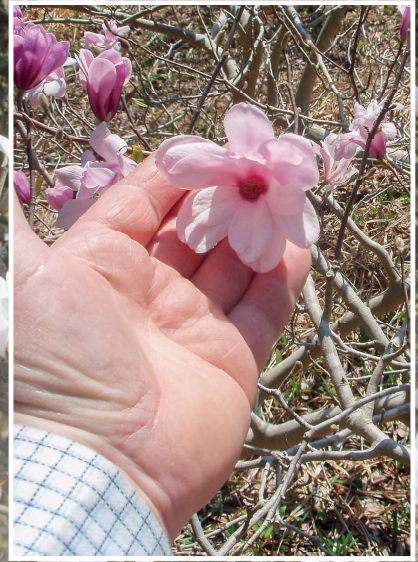
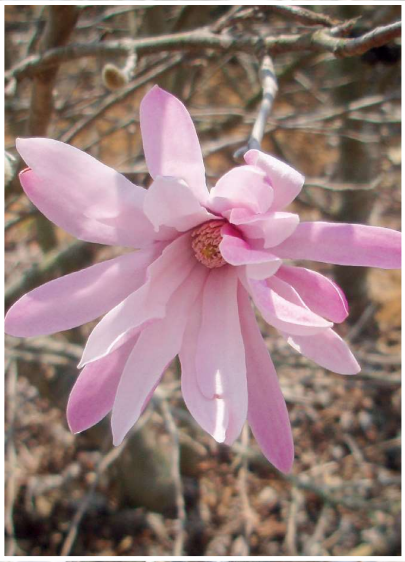
Star magnolia (*Magnolia stellata*) originates from Japan, where it is found in a few isolated forests near Nagoya. The species was introduced into cultivation in 1877 and has since become widespread in both Europe and North America.

In cultivation, we are mainly familiar with it as a shrub that can reach 2–3m, while in its natural environment there are specimens that develop into trees over 7m in height. Another feature that we are used to with the species in cultivation is the beautiful, white, star-like flowers in early spring. In wild populations, the variation in flower form is very large in

both colour and size: flowers can range from all-white to intensely pink and vary from small double blooms to large wide inflorescences over 15cm in diameter. If you want to predict the size and colour of the flowers in cultivation, you should choose a cultivar, because seed-propagated material varies greatly and there is a risk that you might get an unwanted form.







*Star magnolia is native in Japan and can show a fantastic diversity in expressions, including really pink flower colours and almost tree-like individuals, as the images here show. (All photographs on this page and opposite by Erland Ejder)*





A nice detail of the star magnolia is that not all the flowers bloom at once. Due to the species' very early flowering during late March–May, buds are sometimes damaged by spring frosts. By opening over a fairly extended period, some usually avoid the spring frosts.

Star magnolia is found in moist to wet forest systems, which makes it relatively tolerant of these soil conditions. However, one should be aware that the summer temperatures in the species' natural environments are significantly warmer than the summers in the UK and Sweden. It is certainly amongst the most waterlogging-tolerant magnolias, but it will still perform best on soils with good aeration. In a summer-cool climate such as in Sweden, you should plant star magnolia on moisture-retaining but well-drained soils. For best development and abundant flowering, it should be planted in full sun, but it can handle semi-shady conditions. However, in these conditions you should be prepared for a slightly sparser crown and smaller flower buds. The star magnolia is one of the most winter-hardy magnolia species and is therefore a popular choice for private gardens as well as public plantings in northern Europe.

#### ***M. stellata* 'Centennial'**

A variety that was introduced by the Arnold Arboretum of Harvard University in 1972. It develops a broad pyramidal growth pattern, 6–8m high and 5–7m wide. The beautiful white flowers with a faint hint of pink are unusually large – about 14cm in diameter when fully open.

#### ***M. stellata* 'Chrysanthemumiflora'**

A very beautiful cultivar of star magnolia that develops over time into a broad multi-stemmed shrub, 3–5m high and about 3m wide. It is quite slow-growing as a young and newly established plant. The light pink flowers have up to 40 tepals (petals), which means that you experience them as double in form. It is a beautiful spectacle to see the buds swell and then unfold.

#### ***M. stellata* 'Encore'**

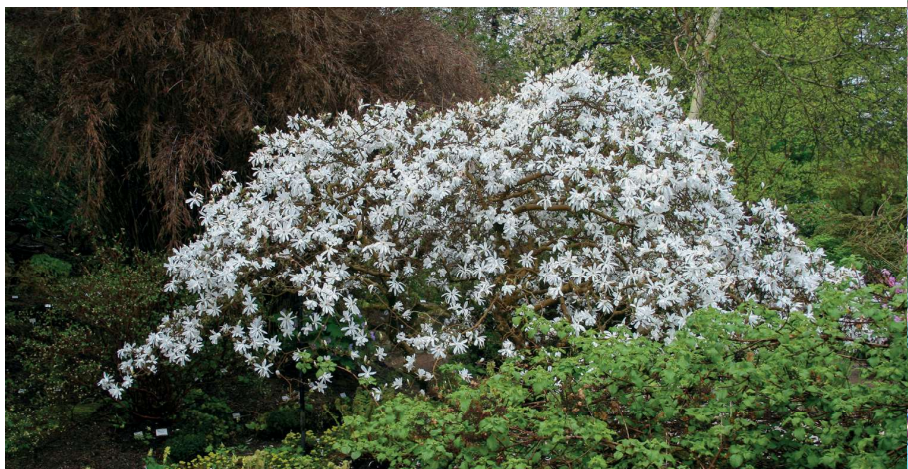
A relatively slow-growing variety that develops into a large multi-stemmed shrub, 3–4m high and almost as wide. When the buds swell, they have a clear pink colour which changes to white with a faint pink when the flowers are completely open. The flowers have 20–25 tepals (petals).

#### ***M. stellata* 'Rosea'**

A very common cultivar name that probably includes several clones with more or less clear pink flower colouration. If you want to know in advance that you will get a clear pink star magnolia, you should choose another cultivar. However, you can make an assessment by seeing the different plants when they are in bloom and choosing the one with the most colour – otherwise you risk getting a plant with small flowers and a very light and washed-out pink hue.



*Star magnolias are grown mainly for their fragrant, beautiful, star-like, white flowers in early spring, which make the species the messenger of spring*



*In cultivation, we are mainly familiar with the star magnolia as a rounded shrub that usually offers a really generous spring bloom.*

#### ***M. stellata* 'Royal Star'**

One of the most common cultivars of star magnolia that develops into a large shrub with an upright, rounded growth habit, 4–5m high and 3–4m wide. When they are newly developed, the flowers are pale pink, becoming completely white with a faint hint of pink. The flowers usually comprise 25–30 tepals (petals) which gives the flower a nice volume.

#### ***M. stellata* 'Waterlily'**

A cultivar of star magnolia that develops an upright pyramidal growth pattern, 4–5m high and almost as wide at the base of the bush. The flowers are clearly pink when they develop but are white with a more or less faint pink tinge when completely open. Compared to

many of the other cultivars mentioned here this one flowers relatively late, which means that it is less damaged by late spring frosts.



**Dr Henrik Sjöman** is a Lecturer at the Swedish University of Agriculture Sciences and a Scientific Curator at Gothenburg Botanic Garden.



**Dr Andrew Hiron** is a Senior Lecturer in Arboriculture and Urban Forestry at University Centre Myerscough.