

Magnolias for cold climates

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CAN MAGNOLIAS BE GROWN successfully in cold northerly gardens? That was the question I asked myself some 20 years ago. I had admired these spring flowering trees and shrubs in parks and gardens in Denmark, Holland and even the southern parts of Norway, but what about my own garden? I live in Norway, in the rainy and cool, west coast town of Ålesund, far north of Bergen, where strong winds come in from the Atlantic all summer. Could I possibly experience the same beautiful sights there? I decided to find out.

Ålesund is situated a little north of the 62nd latitude. Following that line around the globe, places such as the southern regions of Greenland and Baffin Island, Hudson Bay, Anchorage in Alaska and Jakutsk in Siberia are to be found, places no one would ever dream of as home for a magnolia and yet still I wanted to try.

I am fortunate that my 0.2ha (0.5 acre) garden is low-lying and well-protected from winds by surrounding trees. The climate is typically oceanic with plentiful rain all year round (c.1700mm a year). Snow is a certainty each year, but its duration is less predictable, and temperatures can plummet to -17°C or soar to $+29^{\circ}\text{C}$, although it is usually not that extreme. In fact, a mild January day of $8-9^{\circ}\text{C}$ can be much the same as a cool July one! My great helper is, of course, the blessed Gulf Stream which brings warm sea water from the southern Atlantic upwards along our west coast. It gives us a climate that makes

agriculture and gardening possible further north than anyone would believe by just looking at a map, but whether it could bring enough heat to grow magnolias successfully was something I needed to establish.

I soon discovered that there were few, if any, experienced gardeners in my area to ask and looking around very closely, I could only find a handful of magnolias planted in local gardens. These were mostly the same species, *Magnolia sieboldii* and one or two *M. stellata*, apparently the only varieties ever offered for sale here until to the late 1980s. When I asked local nurserymen, they simply replied: '*Magnolias can't be grown here*' – end of discussion.

Of course this was before the internet, which meant I had to refer to books and garden magazines to learn more about magnolias. Thus I was introduced to the different species and hybrids, and which of them were reckoned to be the best. It seemed that most authorities mentioned *M. x soulangeana* first when they were asked and this was reflected in the number of beautiful photographs of the different *M. x soulangeana* varieties in catalogues. I wondered how well they would perform in my garden. The only way to find out would be to try, but – hang on – I discovered magnolias are expensive! Buying 10–20 different magnolias just like that was simply not possible; I had to learn to make informed choices before I started ordering, selecting only what appeared to be the best.

Unexpected helpers came my way. From an article in a garden magazine I learned of the Norwegian magnolia collector, Olav Kalleberg (father of *Magnolia* 'Åshild Kalleberg'). He kindly shared his experiences with me and gave me a list of plants he considered to have potential in colder gardens than his own. (He lives in the south of Norway which benefits from more summer heat.) Then, from out of a blue sky, I stumbled across information about a grant scheme which offered to fund individuals working for the promotion of flowering gardens. In short, I applied, was accepted and received a generous sum of money. With less financial restraint I could order magnolias to trial from a range of different sources, although most came from Otto Eisenhut's nursery in Switzerland.

The following spring I was busy planting out expensive plants in my garden, mostly on south facing slopes which I considered would be the warmest sites and offer most hope of success but also against the walls of my house, while others were simply placed where space could be found. Over the next 10–12 years I planted more, until I had over 20 different magnolias under trial in my cold soils.

When talking about magnolias, growers often

say that the most difficult thing is to get them going but that once they are established, neglect is the best care. All agree that definitely no deep mechanical weeding must be done over the roots and that is also my experience. Some of my plants took years to start real growth. Others never got that far and died the first winter. Some sprouted well – and froze back the same length – every year. Sometimes the plants I bought from Holland had flower buds when they arrived and they flowered the first spring; they were often the only flowers I ever saw on those plants. Afterwards they just seemed to struggle to keep alive. Some plants had sickly looking yellow leaves as if they were cold to the bones.

Well, back to my first question: Can magnolias be grown successfully in cold northerly gardens? After nearly 20 years my answer is YES, but only if the right varieties are chosen.

Now I have a small magnolia collection for a cold climate; I guess the most northern magnolia collection in the world. I have white, yellow and pink magnolias flowering every spring and more during summer. On the other hand I have produced some very expensive compost from dead magnolias.



One lesson from my first experiences is the fact that *M. x soulangeana* is not good for cool climates. Except for one variety (see below), all had problems ripening their new wood and froze back every winter, resulting in ugly plants and no flowers. They are among the most beautiful garden plants, but leave them at the garden centre if you live in a cold place!



I feel I have enough experience now to be confident in recommending varieties for cold climates like my own. More than that though, I now have magnolias that have become firm favourites and these are described below.

SPRING FLOWERING WHITES

M. stellata gives a good show every year after the plant matures.

M. 'Wada's Memory' started flowering at a young age and flowers well every year even though it is planted in shade near bigger trees.

M. x loebneri 'Merrill' flowers very well once it has reached a certain age, but is best with heat from a south wall.

M. x soulangeana 'Alba Superba' has proved better than other *M. x soulangeana* varieties here, flowering a little all through summer, but it seems to perform better in a warmer climate and is still my last choice of these four.

All these are fully hardy, although in wet springs the flowers can turn brown. *M. stellata* flowers before the leaves, the others when the leaves come out.

M. denudata, *M. salicifolia* and *M. kobus* all failed to ripen their new growth and did not do well, even though the latter two are deemed to be among the hardiest species.

SPRING FLOWERING REDS/PINKS

M. 'Galaxy' gives a fantastic show every spring, flowers over a long period and is both fully hardy and fast growing. It has become my absolute favourite.

M. liliiflora 'Nigra', *M. 'Susan'*, *M. x loebneri 'Leonard Messel'* and *M. x soulangeana* (different cultivars) did not stand the test. All these had problems ripening their new growth and thus froze back in winter.

My local garden centres sell *M. 'Susan'* in quantity every year. I have tried to persuade them to change to *M. 'Galaxy'*, but in vain, which is a pity. My experience would suggest that *M. 'Galaxy'* could be successfully established in most gardens here while *M. 'Susan'* is normally an expensive one-spring stand, although some growers seem to succeed quite well with *M. 'Susan'* in very favourable places.



YELLOW MAGNOLIAS

M. 'Yellow Lantern' gives some flowers every year. It is fully hardy, although not very floriferous, but still, it is a fine contrast to the others. Maybe it will flower better as it matures.

M. 'Yellow Bird' grew well and flowered, but died suddenly for no obvious reason (certainly not frost). I believe it is hardy enough for our climate and would like to try it again.

M. acuminata, *M. tripetala* and *M. 'Butterflies'* are not hardy enough. The first two died. *M. 'Butterflies'* is still alive and even flowering, but grows very slowly and has to be trained against a wall to do well. Incidentally, yellow magnolias lose their intensity of colour here, becoming whitish in northern and cold areas.

SUMMER FLOWERING MAGNOLIAS

M. sieboldii is very easy, just like any other shrub. It even produces viable seeds. This is the species I would suggest to beginners and for windy gardens.

M. wilsonii has just started flowering here after about 12 years from seed, is fully hardy and will most likely become a big tree. It offers an alternative to *M. sieboldii* for more experienced gardeners.

M. 'Åshild Kalleberg', a *M. x wieseneri* clone selected by Olav Kalleberg and named after his wife, is very promising, but my plant is still young. It grows quickly, is very hardy and may outgrow the others in the end. This is the only registered Norwegian magnolia variety to date.

M. hypoleuca (syn. *M. obovata*) is a species I have raised from seed sourced from Gothenburg Botanical Garden. It has reached four metres (12 feet) and is fully hardy. Although I do not expect flowers for the next ten years it has very striking leaves and an attractive growth habit. A collector's plant.

So there you are, more than 10 magnolias for a cold garden. Of course, this is not a scientific test. It is a keen amateur's wisdom after 20 years caring for his plants. There are a lot of plants I did not try, for example lots of newer hybrids. With a few exceptions I only tried one plant of each, and maybe some were planted in better sites than others. There may also be better clones than I have purchased.



Still I feel that my results could be useful to others living in places where magnolia culture is uncommon and I believe many gardeners who never dreamt of planting a magnolia could grow at least one of my top three – *M. sieboldii*, *M. 'Wada's Memory'* and *M. 'Galaxy'*.

And now, when I have no space for more magnolias, I have started a new test project. In 2007 I planted two camellias in my garden and I have more than 20 seedlings from hardy American hybrids. Of course I know that camellias can't grow here, but do they? I will be back with my results in 20 years.

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