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# Magnolias Are Worth the Effort

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## GARDEN NOTES

# MAGNOLIAS ARE WORTH THE EFFORT

*By Dennis Hinkamp*

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Spring-10

Although most magnolias are best viewed in *Gone with the Wind*, a few can grow and add their beauty to our harsh northern Utah environment.

Few trees are more stately or spectacular than a magnolia in full bloom, says Jerry Goodspeed, Utah State University Extension horticulturist. Their large, fragrant blossoms perfume the air in spring.

The magnolia genus includes around 150 different species, he says. Most are native to Asia. Magnolias can be large trees or small shrubs. Most flower in the spring before the leaves emerge with blossoms ranging in color from white to deep pink and purple.

Magnolias prefer a rich, organic, well-drained soil, Goodspeed explains. They grow best in an acidic to neutral soil, but a few varieties tolerate Utah's alkaline soils. When planting a magnolia, find a protected area where the soil drains. Keep the plant mulched with organic matter to improve the soil and its acidity. They can be grown in full sun but prefer partial shade. Most magnolias do best with deep, infrequent watering. They do not tolerate wet soil or high water tables.

"One problem with magnolias in northern Utah is their susceptibility to late frosts," he says. "If a plant in full bloom is hit by freezing temperatures, the flowers turn brown or black and die. Severely cold winters also damage or kill the flower buds before they ever open."

The most popular magnolias are the saucer and star, with a few hybrids slowly finding their way into the market, Goodspeed says. The saucer magnolia, *Magnolia X soulangiana*, can grow into a tree as high as 30 feet, although not many do that well in Utah. It's more common for them to grow to about 20 feet with a similar spread.

Alexandrina and Rustic Rubra are probably the two most common cultivars of the saucer magnolia sold in Utah, he notes. Alexandrina blooms are rose-purple colored on the outside and pure white on the inside, while Rustic Rubra has a more red tint to the flowers. Other varieties include *Brozzonii*, *Alba* and *Lennei*.

The star magnolia, *Magnolia stellata*, is classified as a shrub, Goodspeed says. Most grow between 7 and 15 feet tall with a similar spread. They are hardier than the saucer magnolia, many withstanding temperatures as cold as 30 degrees, and are more adaptable to different soil types. Some varieties include Royal Star, Waterlily and Centennial.

“The hybrids are a little taller than the star magnolia but usually not as large as the saucers,” he says. “Elizabeth was developed as the first true yellow magnolia, but the color fades as the blossoms emerge into a creamy-white color. Butterflies and Goldfinch are newer yellows but difficult to find. The hybrid, Pristine, has a fragrant, beautiful, white, lily-shaped blossom. Although they are hard to find, they are well worth the effort.”

Magnolias make wonderful specimen plantings in most landscapes, Goodspeed says. When not in bloom, the plants are still attractive with their large, dark green leaves. Even their winter form is attractive and their bark is showy.

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