

## *Magnolia x soulangiana*—*Saucer Magnolia*

The Magnolia family (Magnoliaceae) contains many trees and shrubs with spectacular, showy flowers. It is of great botanical interest because it is considered to be among the most primitive flowering plants still present on the earth. The genus *Magnolia* contains about 80 species that are naturally distributed throughout eastern North America and eastern Asia. Magnolias have been cultivated in Buddhist temple gardens as early as 650 AD. Various American and Asian species were introduced to European gardens in the late 1600's. The Saucer Magnolia is not a natural species. It is a hybrid of *M. denudata* and *M. liliflora* (both originally from China) made by the French horticulturist, Etienne Soulange-Bodin in 1820. It was probably introduced to English gardens in 1827 or 1828. Since then the species probably has been recreated many times and many backcrosses have been made resulting in a large variety of named cultivars.

The Saucer Magnolia is now one of the most commonly cultivated Magnolias in the world. Saucer Magnolias are deciduous and bloom profusely before the new leaves expand so that each tree bursts into a striking floral display. The six inch-wide flowers stand upright and consist of many, pale pink to deep red-purple "tepals" (no distinct sepals and

petals) surrounding an elongate receptacle with many stamens and individual carpels spirally arranged on the surface. The tepals are generally darker in color on the outer surfaces. Since the Saucer Magnolia is a hybrid, it is typically sterile and the flowers rarely produce fruit or seed. The leaves are variable but are usually 4-6 inches long and are light green in color.

The Saucer Magnolias are among the first trees to flower each year on Victoria Avenue. They typically start blooming in January and peak in February. The species is very hardy, flowers at an early age, tolerates a wide variety of soil and climatic conditions and survives the summer heat of Riverside relatively well. The many cultivars are small trees to large shrubs, grow slowly and, therefore, make a splendid addition to even the small urban garden. Saucer Magnolias can be seen in the median strips of Victoria Avenue between Myrtle to Central and Gibson to Van Buren.

### **Additional Reading:**

Callaway, Dorothy J. 1994. *The World of Magnolias*. Timber Press

