

Magnolia grandiflora—Southern Magnolia

Magnolia grandiflora or Southern Magnolia is the namesake of Magnolia Avenue running through the heart of Riverside. This handsome evergreen tree is native to the southeastern United States. Because of its great beauty, size and extensive distributions, it is often regarded as a symbol the American South. *M. grandiflora* reaches 75 to 100 ft in height and is rounded to a pyramidal shape with a straight trunk in its youth and becoming more spreading with age. In its native environment the trees are usually left unpruned so that the lower branches rest on the ground, whereas in Riverside they are “limbed up” so that the smooth, dark gray trunk shows. The leaves are large (8x4 in) and very distinctive due to their stiff, leathery texture. They are glossy, deep green on the upper surface and fuzzy, green to brown on the lower surface. The specific epithet (*grandiflora*) refers to the flowers, and grand they are! These large flowers are 6 to 10 in across, fragrant, cup-shaped, and have 9 to 12 petal-like tepals that surround the central cylindrical column on which are arranged the numerous stamens and separate carpels. At maturity, the central column becomes a large cone-like aggregate of dry fruits, which split open to expose fleshy, red seeds suspended by slender threads. These seeds are eaten and dispersed by birds. *M. grandiflora* flowers from April to September and fruits from September to November.



Although *M. grandiflora* has been cultivated as an ornamental in its native areas of Southeastern US since early times, it was introduced into European cultivation in the late 1720s. It was introduced into California sometime before 1860 and became one of the most popular ornamental trees in California cities in the later decades of the nineteenth century. As the story goes, the original plan for Magnolia Avenue called for a complete planting of the species on all blocks. However, when it was discovered that the cost of this tree was about two dollars each, while other tree species, like blue gums and California Peppers cost only a few cents each, it was decided to reduce the number of Magnolias to a limited number of blocks. Today Southern Magnolias are among the most widely planted broad-leaved, evergreen tree and they are distributed to areas of mild climate around the world, especially the east coast (Washington DC to Florida) and west coast (Seattle to San Diego), Central and South America and parts of Asia.

This species is a common site on the parkways of Victoria Avenue, however, many individuals are sparsely branched. This is probably due to an inadequate water supply, since they are native to a much wetter climate.

