

Meanderings in New Zealand

Pat McCracken

August in North Carolina and I heard a dripping sound—like a gentle spring shower. Then I realized that the sound was sweat pouring off of me in buckets. Yes, it was August in North Carolina! To heck with that—I headed off to New Zealand for about six weeks. Early August is near the end of winter in New Zealand and a great time NOT to be in North Carolina.

After three plane transfers and nearly 24 hours of flying time, I arrived in Auckland, New Zealand and immediately noticed a couple of things.: at 7AM it was still completely dark, and the temperature was really chilly. Having left North Carolina with the temperature pushing 100°F (38°C), it was a very pleasant shock to feel winter weather! This was only my second visit to New Zealand, but it felt like coming home (New Zealand is my favorite place on Earth.).

Driving southeast from the airport it was a thrill to see forests of tree ferns and huge *Cordyline australis* (Cabbage Tree) along the road. After a beautiful 1½-hour drive, I arrived at the home and nursery of my good friend Peter Cave. Peter's garden is full of a wide range of rare plants and many very large magnolias. It was still too early in the season for the magnolias to be blooming, but I didn't care—I was in New Zealand!

The next couple of weeks were spent visiting friends all across North Island and visiting some of the fantastic natural areas that New Zealand is so famous for. One day there was a heavy snowfall in the mountains and it was amazing to see just about every car stopped with people staring in awe at the beautiful view (see photo below).

One of my favorite places was a fairly long boat ride out to White Island—an active volcano. No, there wasn't lava pouring out, but the crater has boiling lakes of water and mud and high-pressure steam vents that can be heard miles away (see photo).



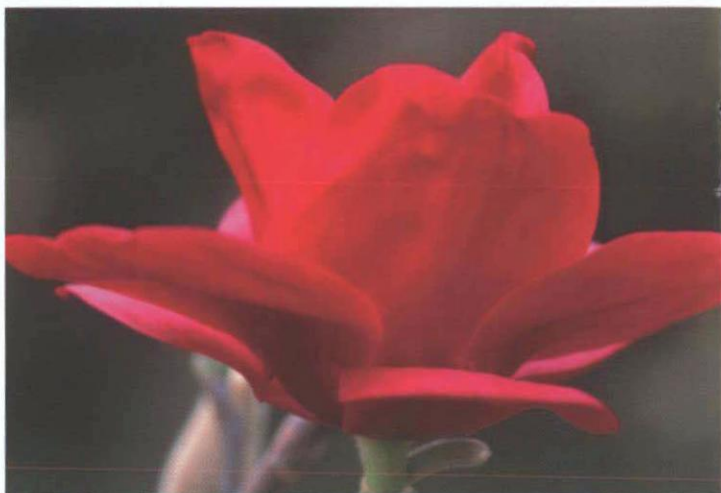
MAGNOLIA

The tour actually takes you on an awesome hike right through the crater. At times, you must wear a gas mask so that the various sulfur gases don't kill you! Absolutely stunning sites, sounds, and smells that completely surround you all come together to create an amazing experience. I would highly recommend this trip to anyone!

Yes, I know this is supposed to be an article on magnolias, but New Zealand is so much more than just magnolias!

Spring began slowly as New Zealand was experiencing record late freezes and many of the magnolia flowers were destroyed (sound familiar?). Fortunately, there were still a lot of great magnolias to see. I spent several days photographing the magnolias in Peter Cave's garden. My two favorites there were actually selections that Peter had made. Many of you might know 'Sweetheart' (see pho-

From top:
White Island, *Magnolia*
'Sweetheart,' *Magnolia* 'Royal
Purple.'





Magnolia 'Ian's Red'

to) with beautiful, large pink flowers. The other, 'Royal Purple' (see photo), is a recent introduction with, yes, royal purple flowers on a very upright-growing tree. I was fortunate to have been able to bring scions from this plant into North America (no, I don't have any available yet).

From Peter's garden, I headed back toward Auckland to visit the incredible magnolia collection of Ian Baldick. To the best of

my knowledge, Ian's collection is the largest in New Zealand. Ian is also breeding "red" flowered magnolias that should be more adaptable to the colder climates of the USA and Europe. One of my favorites was 'Ian's Red' (see photo). Ian's garden is less frost prone than many other areas of New Zealand and we enjoyed a wonderful day photographing the collection.

The next day Ian and I headed North of Auckland to visit the garden of the late Os Blumhardt (I was fortunate to have met Os on the previous trip to New Zealand). The climate that far north is fairly tropical and we saw many beautiful specimens of tender magnolias. My favorite was a *Michelia*-type (species unknown) called 'Dan Quang.' It was a giant ball of white flowers and was truly outstanding. The magnolia collection here was stunning and we saw many of the seedling magnolias that Os had developed over the years.

Next, I headed down the West coast to visit my friends Mark and Abbie Jury. Mark has produced many stunning magnolias and is continuing his breeding program (keep your eyes open for some great new plants coming from Mark). The Jury garden is on the side of a questionably dormant volcano near New Plymouth (the west coast of North Island) and has beautiful, rich soil, high rainfall uniformly through the year, and is nearly frost free. Needless to say, everything will grow in this climate and Mark seems to have it all in his garden! It would take days to even start to see all the plants this stunning garden has to offer. I've been fortunate to have the opportunity to spend several days wandering the garden with Mark over the past three trips to New Zealand (I've made a third trip since writing this article). There are

simply too many fantastic magnolias to pick a favorite from Mark's garden, but 'Felix' (see photo) is high on my list. This Jury selection has giant raspberry red flowers that are simply impossible to describe.

Many roles of film later, I headed just a few miles down the coast to visit Vance Hooper. Vance has been breeding magnolias for many years and is developing plants with small statures (I don't think they will become large, anyway) that bloom as very young plants. It was amazing to see seedlings flowering that were only 1 or 2 years old! Probably my favorite was 'Genie' (see photo), which I believe will be available in the USA and Europe in the near future.

After spending a wonderful day looking at magnolias with Vance, I took a short drive south to visit my good friends Glyn and Gail Church. If it is possible to have better gardening conditions than Mark Jury's, they would be found in the Church's garden. Plants grow at staggering rates there (think of the story of Jack and the Beanstalk). With frost nearly unheard of, the garden contains many very tender magnolias (and a huge array of other plants).

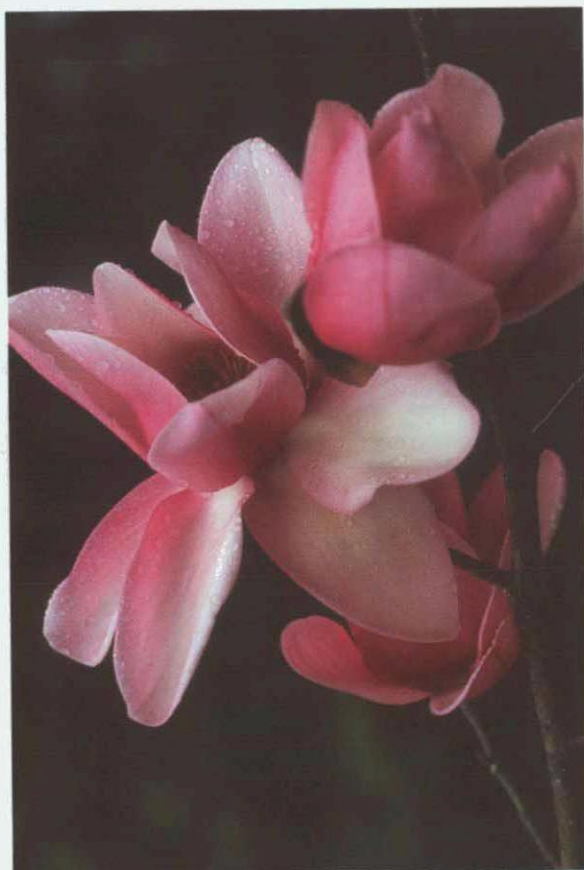
Glyn has made crosses between *Magnolia delavayi* and *Magnolia garrettii* (tropical with large deep red flowers). I don't believe that they have flow-



Magnolia 'Felix.'



Magnolia 'Genie.'



Magnolia 'Aurora.'

are literally thousands upon thousands of wild-collected and nursery-purchased plants of just about any genus imaginable. We saw more rare species of magnolias than I have ever seen before, each one more exciting than the last. Again, I'm not sure that I could pick a single favorite magnolia from this garden, but was certainly impressed with 'Aurora' (see photo). We spent two days wandering this immense collection and only saw a small part! It would be great to spend a month (or a year) in this one garden alone. Sadly, we only had two days in Gwavas, but we had more adventures ahead of us.

We next headed over to John and Fiona Wills' garden, Trelinnoe, to see the superb magnolia and rhododendron collections as well as an extremely wide range of other plants as well. The garden covers approximately 30-40 acres of land, but feels like it is much larger. Not only does this garden have vast numbers of great plants, but it is also very well designed. Winding paths open onto large expanses of garden with great views to the distant mountains.

ered yet, but the promise of a hardy (halfway) evergreen magnolia with large pink flowers is there! Glyn has several very dwarf selections of *Magnolia laevifolia* (formerly *Magnolia dianica*) that could have great potential in gardens located in zones 7, or warmer.

After spending a few more weeks visiting with garden friends, Peter Cave and I headed over to the east coast to visit two phenomenal gardens.

Mike and Carola Hudson's garden, Gwavas, covers roughly 30 acres (it seemed more like several hundred to me) and is simply impossible to describe the extent of this plant collection. There

It was rather late in the season for magnolias in this garden; however, we saw a stunning beauty in full bloom. This plant was grown from seed obtained from the MSI seed counter and was listed as an open pollinated *Magnolia campbellii* 'Alba.' We all doubted this since all other *M. campbellii* finished blooming 4-6 weeks earlier! For that matter, even most of the *M. stellata* and *M. x soulangeana* were nearly finished blooming and the late, yellow-flowered magnolias were just coming into bloom. The tree had huge numbers of very large, white (very soft pink), fragrant flowers (see photo), and was probably the most stunning magnolia that I saw in New Zealand. As we were standing there in awe, John decided to name the tree 'Fiona' after his wife. We, of course, begged a few scions and successfully grafted a few plants at Peter Cave's Nursery. I brought a few scions home as well, but did not succeed in getting a plant at that time, but have since received a few more scions and now have a couple of small plants in the USA. 'Fiona' is very exciting due to its very late bloom time, but it will be a few years before 'Fiona' is available.. With luck, this may greatly expand the range of large flowering magnolias.



Magnolia 'Fiona.'

Nearing the end of the trip, several of us had organized a magnolia lecture near Auckland. Ian Baldick had advertised the meeting in the national gardening magazines and we had four lecturers: Peter Cave spoke on magnolias of New Zealand; Vance Hooper spoke on magnolias in southern England; Hamish Mitchell came from Australia and spoke on marketing magnolias and also on the MSI trip to Italy; and I spoke on new cultivars and yellow magnolias. Since we only had a one month advance notice of the meeting, I was hoping that we might have 10-20 people show up but, amazingly, over 100 people attended! Ian Baldick and a few others brought in magnolia flowers for display and had at least 100 cultivars to show us. Everyone had a fantastic time and it showed me just how much people in New Zealand love magnolias and gardening in general. Thanks again to Ian for making this such a fantastic meeting!

There were many other gardens and nurseries that I visited (over 90 nurseries I believe) as well as natural areas. New Zealand is a land of superlatives—fantastic people, plants and scenery—and is truly my favorite place on Earth. If anyone would like a personal tour of New Zealand, give me a call (and buy me an airline ticket). I'm ready to go—especially when I hear the sound of sweat dripping—in August—in North Carolina!

All photographs by the author.

