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Florida-Friendly Landscaping™ PROGRAM

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Magnolia grandiflora 'Little Gem': 'Little Gem' Southern Magnolia[1]

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Introduction

This cultivar of Southern Magnolia has a compact, upright growth habit more typical of a multistemmed shrub than a single-trunked tree. It grows at a slow rate to a height of perhaps 30 to 35 feet with an 8 to 12-foot spread and flowers at two or three years old. It is surprising to see a Magnolia flower when it is only three or four feet tall. `Little Gem' Southern Magnolia forms a dense, dark green oval or pyramidal shape, making it suited for screen or hedge planting.

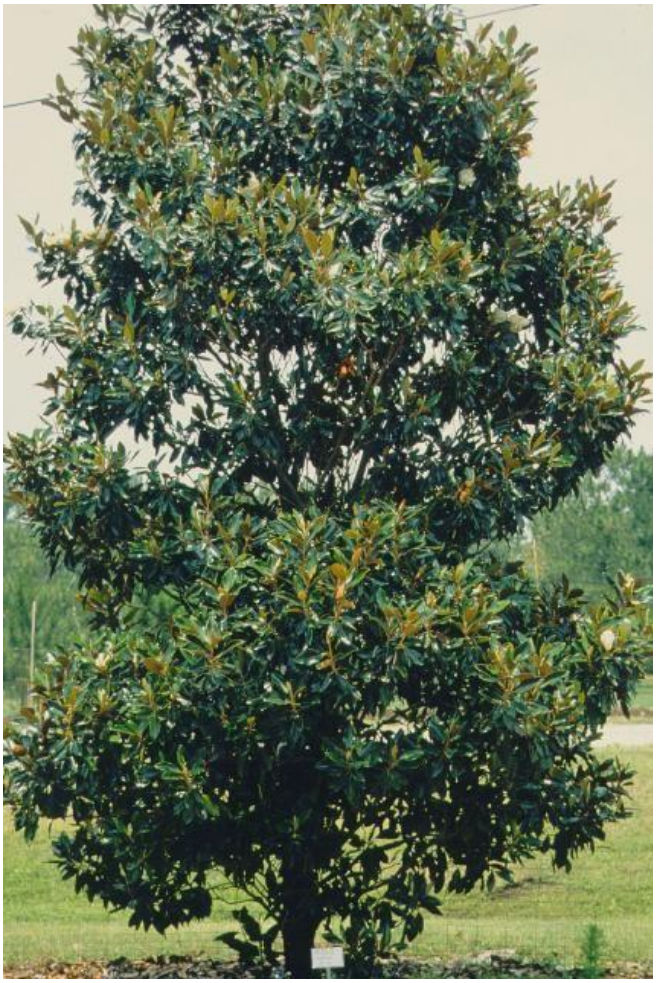

Figure 1. Young *Magnolia grandiflora* 'Little Gem': 'Little Gem' Southern Magnolia
Credit: Ed Gilman

General Information

Scientific name: *Magnolia grandiflora*

Pronunciation: mag-NO-lee-uh gran-dih-FLOR-uh

Common name(s): 'Little Gem' Southern Magnolia

Family: *Magnoliaceae*

USDA hardiness zones: 7A through 10A (Fig. 2)

Origin: native to North America

Invasive potential: little invasive potential

Uses: container or planter; street without sidewalk; deck or patio; screen; specimen; espalier; tree lawn 3-4 feet wide; tree lawn 4-6 feet wide; tree lawn > 6 ft wide; highway median

Availability: somewhat available, may have to go out of the region to find the tree

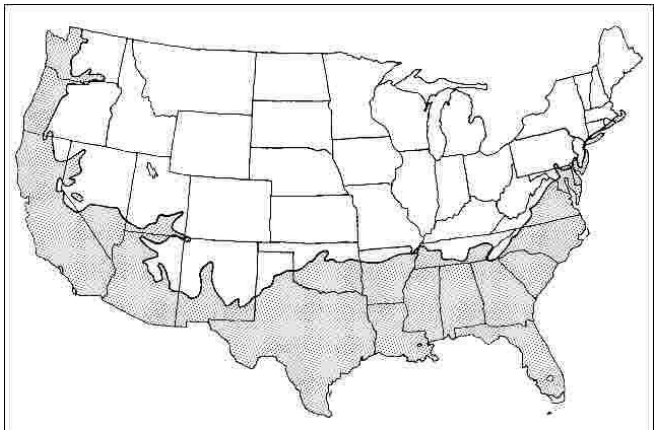

Figure 2. Range

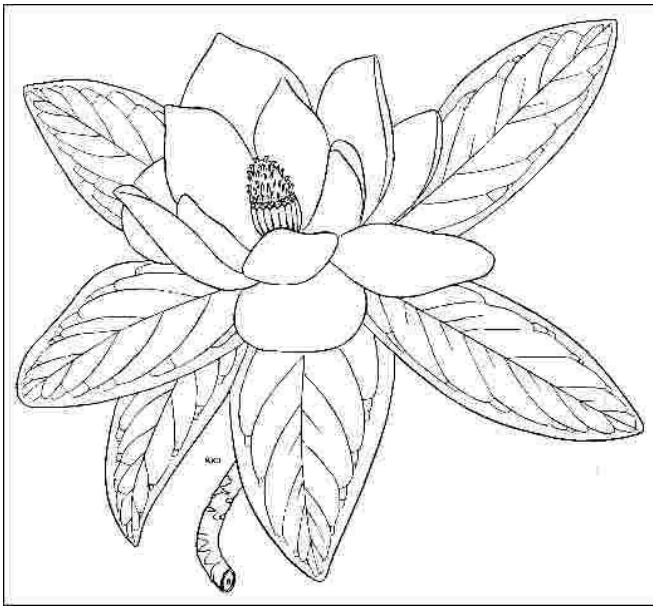

Figure 3. Foliage

Description

Height: 40 to 60 feet

Spread: 20 to 30 feet

Crown uniformity: symmetrical

Crown shape: upright/erect, pyramidal

Crown density: dense

Growth rate: slow

Texture: coarse

Foliage

Leaf arrangement: alternate (Fig. 3)

Leaf type: simple

Leaf margin: entire

Leaf shape: elliptic (oval), ovate

Leaf venation: brachidodrome, pinnate

Leaf type and persistence: evergreen, broadleaf evergreen

Leaf blade length: 4 to 8 inches

Leaf color: green

Fall color: no color change

Fall characteristic: not showy

Flower

Flower color: white/cream/gray

Flower characteristics: very showy

Fruit

Fruit shape: elongated

Fruit length: 1 to 3 inches, 3 to 6 inches

Fruit covering: dry or hard

Fruit color: brown, red

Fruit characteristics: attracts birds; showy; fruit/leaves a litter problem

Trunk and Branches

Trunk/bark/branches: branches don't droop; not showy; typically one trunk; thorns

Pruning requirement: little required

Breakage: resistant

Current year twig color: green

Current year twig thickness: thick

Wood specific gravity: 0.50

Culture

Light requirement: full sun, partial sun or partial shade

Soil tolerances: sand; loam; clay; acidic; slightly alkaline; well-drained; occasionally wet

Drought tolerance: moderate

Aerosol salt tolerance: moderate

Other

Roots: not a problem

Winter interest: no

Outstanding tree: yes

Ozone sensitivity: unknown

Verticillium wilt susceptibility: susceptible

Pest resistance: resistant to pests/diseases

Use and Management

The five to 8-inch-long, leathery, oblong, shiny leaves are shed as new foliage emerges in the spring. The large, slowly-decomposing leaves drop on the sidewalk or patio and are considered by some people to be messy or a nuisance to clean up. The underside of the leaves is covered with a fine, red-brown fuzz which is more prominent on some selections than others. In late spring and sporadically throughout the summer, huge, 8-inch-diameter, waxy, fragrant, white blossoms open to perfume the entire garden. Fuzzy brown cones follow these blooms, ripening in fall and winter to reveal bright red seeds which are used by a variety of wildlife.

Long-used as a striking garden specimen, Southern Magnolia can also serve as a dense screen or windbreak or street tree where there is plenty of soil space for root expansion. Its ease of growth and carefree nature make Southern Magnolia ideal for the low-maintenance landscape. With proper pruning, Southern Magnolia trees can also be used as an interesting espalier. They are tolerant of pruning and can be shaped into a screen or hedge of almost any form. This is a nice Southern Magnolia for residential properties since it stays small, has small leaves and flowers early.

If moist, peaty soils are available, Southern Magnolia will thrive in full sun and hot conditions once established. If irrigation cannot be provided periodically, plants located in partial shade for several years after planting seem to grow better. Very drought tolerant when grown in areas with plenty of soil for root expansion. Only moderately drought tolerant in restricted-soil areas or in areas with poor, dry soil. Southern Magnolia prefers acid soil but will tolerate a slightly basic, even wet or clay soil. It is generally too hot and dry in central and western Texas and Oklahoma, and the soil pH is often too alkaline for this tree.

The root system is wider spreading than most other trees, extending from the trunk a distance equal to about four times the canopy width. This makes it very difficult to save existing Magnolia trees on construction sites.

Be sure that there are no roots circling close to the trunk, as Magnolia is prone to girdling roots. Cut any circling roots prior to planting. Field-grown trees recover slowly from transplanting due to the wide-spreading root system in the nursery, and trees often transplant best in winter and spring, not in the fall.

The species germinated from seed is quite variable in growth rate and form with some trees dense and compact, others loose and open. A number of cultivars are available: `Bracken's Brown Beauty' has an unusually dark brown lower leaf surface; `Cairo' has an early and long flowering period; `Charles Dickens' has broad, nearly blunt leaves, large flowers and large red fruit; `Edith Bogue' is the hardiest of the cultivars and will bloom when only two to three-years-old; `Glen St. Mary' has a compact form, will bloom when young, is slow-growing, and the leaves have a bronze underside; `Gloriosa' has large flowers and leaves; `Goliath' has flowers up to 12 inches across, a long blooming period, and a bushy habit of growth; `Hasse' can be used for a compact, dense hedge; `Lanceolata' has a narrow pyramidal form, narrower leaves with rusty undersides; `Majestic Beauty' (patented) has large, dark green leaves, a pyramidal shape, and profuse flowering; `Praecox Fastigiata' has upright, narrow growth habit; `Samuel Sommer' has an upright, rapid growth habit and flowers up to 14 inches across; `Victoria' is very hardy, has small flowers, and rust-red leaf-undersides. There are others, often difficult to see real differences among a number of cultivars.

Propagation is by cuttings (for the cultivars), grafting, or seed.

Pests

Scales of various types will infest twigs and leaves. Magnolia scale is the most common scale and can be one half-inch-across. Overwintering scales can be controlled with horticultural oil. Trees appear to grow fine even with heavy infestations, although they can be unsightly.

Tulip-poplar weevil (sassafras weevil) feeds as a leaf miner when young and chews holes in the leaves as an adult.

Magnolia borer is a problem on young nursery stock. It girdles the trunk usually just below the soil surface. Control is difficult but attainable with the proper material.

Diseases

Magnolia may be subject to leaf spots, blights, scabs and black mildews caused by a large number of fungi, or a bacterium but they rarely require chemical controls.

Raking up and disposing infected leaves may reduce leaf spots next year. Algae can also cause leaf spots.

Canker diseases will kill branches. Cankers on branches can be pruned out. Keep trees healthy with regular fertilization and by watering in dry weather.

Verticillium wilt may cause death of a few branches or, rarely, may kill the tree. Prune out dead branches and fertilize.

[1] This document is ENH-534, one of a series of the UF/IFAS Department of Environmental Horticulture. Original publication date November 1993. Revised December 2006. Reviewed February 2014. Visit the Ask IFAS website at https://ask.ifas.ufl.edu for the currently supported version of this publication. © UF/IFAS. This publication is licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 *To learn more about creating and maintaining attractive landscapes that protect Florida's water and natural resources, visit ffl.ifas.ufl.edu/.*

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