

# Brilliant blossoms

The collection of magnolias begun by a former president of the RHS is being continued by his daughter in the arboretum at Llanover in Monmouthshire, reveals **Stephen Anderton**  
Photographs by Britt Willoughby Dyer







**I**F someone asks ‘Have you seen the Great Whites?’ you must either be in shark-infested waters or a woodland garden. In this case, it’s the latter, at Llanover House just outside Abergavenny in Monmouthshire, the home of Elizabeth and Ross Murray. The Great Whites in question are *Prunus* ‘Tai-haku’, Great White cherries, planted in a powerful line along the outside of the walled garden. As do the sharks, they take your breath away.

Even so, it is the 43 varieties of magnolia that makes Llanover so remarkable through the early spring. The house does not nestle in a sheltered Cornish valley—in fact, as it sits on the level flood plain of the River Usk running down to Newport, it is no stranger to frosts early or late—but there are species that flower right at the beginning of the magnolia season, when the flowers are highly susceptible to frost damage. Indeed, south-east Wales is known to be good magnolia country; Cardiff is famous for them.

For the core of its magnolia collection, Llanover has to thank Mrs Murray’s father Robin Herbert, former president of the RHS, who lived there from 1960 to 1999 and was effectively the maker of the arboretum. It runs in a long line past one side of the house, following the course of the stream Rhyd-y-meirch, which, in the 1790s, was developed into a kind of informal water garden

with simple bridges, cascades, ponds and a circular walled space from which to view it. The whole area now covers 18 acres.

Mr Herbert spent a good deal of his youth in the US, where he learned to love displays of native autumn colour. As a result, Llanover has plenty of maples, tupelos, tulip trees and hickories, as well as magnolias. Plants came as gifts or sometimes from seed and often from Hillier’s nursery in Hampshire, such a major player within the RHS. Mrs Murray praises her father’s skill in not over-planting the garden, something so easily done by so many collectors. Nor did he add greatly to the herbaceous element of the arboretum, something the Murrays have chosen to do.

The downfall of many an arboretum is for every next plant to be so contrasting that any sense of place is lost in a confetti of variety. By contrast, Llanover is attractively anchored by the regular repetition of key species:

*Preceding pages: Magnolia x loebneri* ‘Merrill’. *Left: M. x loebneri* ‘Leonard Messel’ is an old favourite that grows well and never gets too big, which makes it ideal for planting near walls and buildings

‘The arboretum is attractively anchored by the repetition of key species’

amelanchiers, cercidiphyllums, taxodiums, metasequoias—and, of course, magnolias.

The soil here is free-draining, gravelly glacial till, some acid, some alkaline, and the water table is high; for all its charms, the stream itself can be a real threat to the garden and floods threatened to burst the ponds and sweep into the walled garden in 2020. Yet Mrs Murray is convinced that it is the constant motion of the watercourses that helps to keep night frosts moving in spring and protects the magnolia blossom from lighter frosts. Although there is always a risk of cold damage to the earliest varieties, such as *M. campbellii* subsp. *mollicomata*, her time at Llanover has led Mrs Murray to think of magnolias as pretty reliable plants.

She has always had an excellent show from ‘Galaxy’, an American variety flowering in March–April with large, rosy-purple goblet flowers. This is the offspring of that dark-purple favourite of suburban gardens, *Magnolia liliiflora* ‘Nigra’, which flowers through spring and well into the summer. Ultimately, ‘Galaxy’ can top 30ft.

Bright-pink ‘Star Wars’, another liliiflora hybrid, was raised in New Zealand and, like ‘Galaxy’, was crossed with a substantial tree-sized early flowering species to produce a fine small tree. ‘Vulcan’, of similar, successful parentage and habit, is almost red. Mrs Murray has her eye on ‘F.J.

Williams’, a 30 ft deep purplish variety with truly enormous blooms that will no doubt find its way into the garden soon. This is a hybrid between *M. sargentiana* ‘Robusta’ and *M. campbellii* subsp. *mollicomata* ‘Lanarth’.

As well as these more modern varieties at Llanover, old stalwarts planted close to the house, including ‘Leonard Messel’ and ‘Merrill’, do so well and never get too large around walls and buildings that they have been planted several times. Further away, the thinner-twigged, tree-like magnolias, such as *Magnolia kobus* and *M. x proctoriana*, are favourites of Mrs Murray, even if their flowers are less showy. There is something about the lighter twig structure that makes them at home among native British woodland trees, although waiting 18 years for *M. x proctoriana* to produce its first flowers was not Mrs Murray’s greatest delight.

First to flower here is usually *Magnolia sprengeri* var. *diva*, a pink Chinese species, and the season ends in July with sweetly scented *M. virginiana*. Mid-season blooms are provided by *M. ‘Elizabeth’* in the circular garden. This was the first of many yellow magnolias to be introduced into this country. ►





Clockwise from above left: *Magnolia* 'Galaxy' can reach 30ft; there is a risk of frost damage to early-flowering varieties such as *M. campbellii* subsp. *mollicomata*; reliable *M. x loebneri* 'Merrill'; *M. kobus* 'Norman Gould' fits seamlessly into British woodlands



## Elizabeth Murray's magnolia lessons

### It's all about background

Because so many magnolias flower before their leaves appear, you have to be very careful about placing them. They need some kind of background that can offset the flowers, especially if they are only going to be seen from a distance. Dark yew is wonderful

### If you want the wow factor, make sure you plant it in the right place

An unbeatable wow comes from *M. campbellii* subsp. *mollicomata* ablaze with deep-pink flowers against blue skies or the bronze indumentum of *M. grandifolia* 'Blanchard' against a white wall

### Plant for resilience

It's wise to plant magnolias in a range of locations and aspects, to spread the risk against frost damage. There's nothing sadder than a total wipe-out

### Buying big is worth it

I won't buy small magnolias any more. I would rather spend £60 on something waist high that I know will grow away in its first year than take a risk on a £30 younger plant, which will probably sit thinking about it for another 12 months before making up its mind to thrive

### Slugs

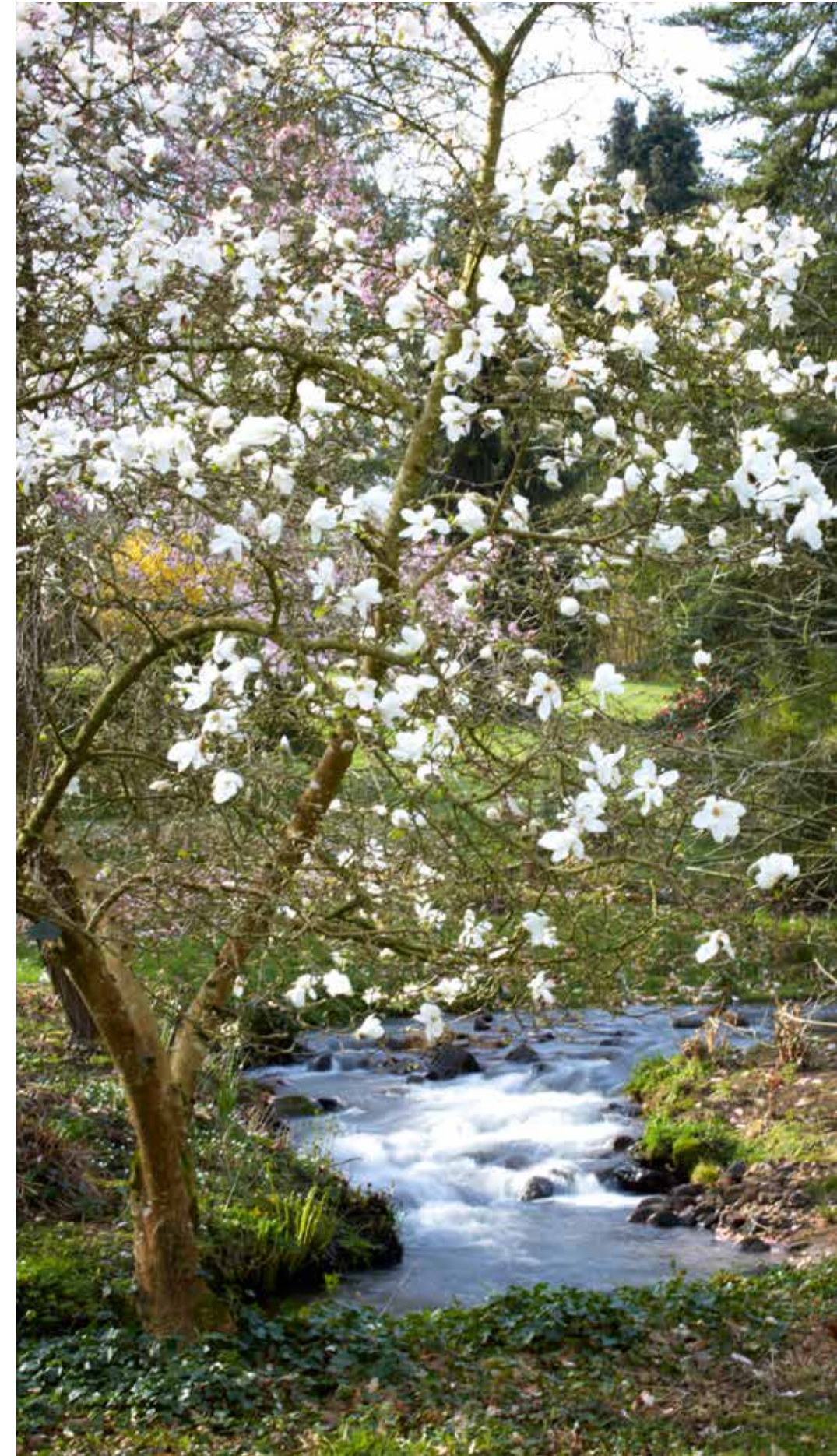
New magnolia shoots are very soft and slugs love to eat the leaders of young plants. You can waste years getting new trees going if you don't protect against slugs. Again, buying big helps

The yellows tend to be late flowering and are, therefore, a good choice for gardens where magnolia blossom is troubled by frost damage.

To boost that late display, *Magnolia virginiana* seedlings are being planted in a wet meadow in the lower arboretum (a suitable spot for a plant known as swamp laurel in America), but what Mrs Murray really hankers for is an avenue of the *M. sieboldii* type, with pendulous fragrant flowers, to walk beneath.

When magnolia petals fall onto the long fronds of tree ferns or the sleeping trunks of gunnera in Cornwall, it's clear they belong to a different, very un-English world. Here, at Llanover, they are instead included in a quiet woodland scene, countrified by the burbling stream and the simple plants of woodland and wetland floor, sheets of wood anemones, primroses, snowdrops, celandines, lady's smock and the first scruffy-headed dandelions. It's remarkable and charming to see magnolias looking so unexotic. 🐌

*Llanover House, Abergavenny, Monmouthshire, is open for the NGS and group visits ([www.llanovergarden.co.uk](http://www.llanovergarden.co.uk))*



*M. kobus* 'Norman Gould' is named after the botanist who created it at RHS Wisley in the 1950s. It is slow growing, but the pure white flowers appear from an early age