

Star Magnolia Bonsai

By Randy Bennett

The Star Magnolia (*Magnolia stellata*) is a compact shrub or small tree. It is a slow-growing native of Japan, closely related to the Kobushi Magnolia (*Magnolia kobus*) and is considered by many to be a variety or cultivar of the Kobushi. However, *Magnolia stellata* was accepted as a distinct species in 1998. It is a deciduous tree that has multiple trunks, much like a crepe myrtle, and puts on a beautiful show of white flowers in late winter in our area. It blooms before putting out any leaves.



The species *Magnolia stellata* may be found growing wild in certain parts of the [Ise Bay](#) area of central [Honshū](#), Japan's largest island, at elevations between 150 and 2,000 feet above sea level. It grows by streams and in moist, boggy areas. It has a climate range that extends to zone 9 and there are many excellent examples in the landscape around New Orleans.

The trees prefer an acid soil with a lot of organic matter that drains well. They do very well in full sun, but will tolerate some shade as long as it is mixed with several hours of full sun. Star Magnolias have thick, fleshy roots which are found fairly close to the surface and do not

tolerate much disturbance. It is therefore, critical to conduct repotting at the optimum time of year and to be judicious when pruning and reducing the roots, much like you would do with Black Pine.

In the New Orleans area, we are more familiar with the Japanese Saucer Magnolia, which puts out brilliant pink to purple, saucer-shaped flowers in profusion before leafing out. The Japanese Star Magnolia flowers are much smaller than the Saucer Magnolia and are primarily white with what can best be described as spidery petals. However, there is a natural variation of flower color among Star magnolias, ranging from white to rich pink; the hue of pink in this species of magnolia also changes from year to year, depending on day and night air temperatures prior to and during flowering. The flowers are star-shaped, with at least 12 thin, delicate petal-like [tepals](#)—some cultivars, like the Royal Star Magnolia have more than 30 petals.



Star magnolia in the landscape

The leaves are bronze color as they emerge and turn dark green as they harden-off. They are oblong shaped and average about 4 inches long and 1 ½ inches wide on trees planted in the ground.

In Japan, the Kobus Magnolia is the preferred species of magnolia used in bonsai. There are many excellent examples to be seen. I was interested in developing a Kobus Magnolia for a

number of years, but was unable to locate any in Louisiana. After a little research, I started reading about the Star Magnolia and finally found a nursery that had a few larger specimens.



Slanting style Star Magnolia bonsai near the end of flowering



Clump style Star Magnolia bonsai

I purchased the tree picture below in December of 2018. It was potted in a 30 gallon nursery container and was about 8 feet in height. I had to cut about 4 feet off the top of the tree before leaving the nursery so I could lay it down in the bed of my truck for transport back to New Orleans. Once I got it home I made a few more cuts and then began to study the tree for a possible design.



December 2018

I knew I wanted to design it the way they grow in nature, namely, with multiple trunks. Initially, there were 16 shoots of various thickness growing from the base of the larger central trunk. After locating what I decided would be the front of the tree, I removed seven of the basal shoots and kept (at least for the time being) a total of nine, including the central trunk. The plan was to remove two more the following year for a total of seven trunks. But, since I had never worked with this species before, I wanted to see how it responded to pruning, how the wounds healed and make sure that the tree had time to re-route vascular tissue and not remove too much at one time in the same area.

In late January of 2019, after flowering was complete, I pruned the tree back to a line and wired some of the trunks. I also used corks to help separate smaller trunks from the main trunk without using wire, which would cut into the trunks long before they had built up enough tissue to hold their positions. The photo below and on the right shows the tree after pruning, wiring

and sealing the cuts. The overall height after pruning was 27 inches and the overall width was 30 inches.



January 2019

The magnolia was allowed to grow all during 2019 with no pruning done. At the end of the 2019 growing season, the overall height was 39 inches. The overall width was 44 inches. The new shoots that sprouted grew about 12 to 14 inches during the year.

The best time to conduct pruning is immediately after flowering and prior to the emergence of leaves. The new leaves emerge immediately after most of the flowers have bloomed, so you cannot wait too long. There will undoubtedly be flowers that remain and possibly a few that have not emerged by the time leaves begin pushing out. Remove all remaining flowers and flower buds before pruning.



January 2020

The photo above was taken in January of 2020. All of the large buds that can be seen in the photo are flower buds.

The photo below shows the base of the tree. The red arrows show the locations of two of the seven shoots that were removed. The lower one was fairly small, as were three of the other shoots that were removed. There were three larger shoots that were removed. All three were about a half inch in diameter. You cannot remove multiple shoots of any significant size that are located in close proximity without the danger of incurring dieback below that area. So it is important to take your time and not remove too much vascular tissue on the trunk at one time.



January 2020

At the writing of this article, the tree has begun to flower. As you examine the photo below, you will notice the fuzzy, protective covering that encapsulates the flower buds and protects them until they begin to emerge. All of the buds had a bright pink coloration this year.



Emerging Flower Bud



Appearance after the bud opened

As the flowers begin to open, the pink coloration begins to fade. The flowers average about 3 ½ inches across, about the size of a large azalea flower. All of the various species of Japanese magnolias are incredibly beautiful, with their profusion of flowers in January that provide a brilliant color display in the dead of winter. Unfortunately, their show is short lived.

Once the tree has finished flowering, I will prune back last years' growth rather heavily and repot the tree into a container about half as deep as the 30 gallon nursery pot, removing no more than half of the roots. After the new leaves have hardened-off, which will probably be in mid-March, I will begin fertilizing with an organic fertilizer mix.

I will provide a follow-up report in a couple of months, so that you can observe how the tree is progressing.