

THE GREAT OUTDOORS



The name "magnolia" honors the French botanist Pierre Magnol (1638-1715), while virginiana means "of Virginia." Three phases of the blossoms shown here hanging over the waters of the Menantico Creek (Photo: J. Morton Galetto).

Sweet and Swampy, (*Magnolia virginiana*)

Sweetbay magnolia adds incredible beauty and fragrance wherever it thrives, including our Jersey swamps and riverbanks.

By J. Morton Galetto

I first began to take notice of sweetbay magnolia, *magnolia virginiana*, thirty-five years ago during our travels along the banks of the Menantico River in mid-June, checking

for osprey nests. The long branches of the tree extended low over the river's surface. The fragrant white flowers perched at the farthest end of a branch, allowing you to inspect them more closely and inhale their fragrance.

The aroma is extremely sweet-smelling. People have described it as similar to lemon, bananas, Champagne, or as fruity. I asked a fellow river lover what he thinks of the scent and he replied, "Sweet and soothing."

A few internet searches showed that in fact aromatherapists consider the scent incredibly relaxing. A number of perfumes are magnolia-based. Cosmetologist B. Bhattacharya's top picks rated them as best for "all occasions, relaxation, seductive, intoxicating and refreshing."

These descriptions are making my adjective selection seem very inadequate; I simply perceive a sweet scent and that's it. Possibly if I were writing this when it was in bloom, as opposed to bearing fruit, I could do better.

As long as I'm not waxing poetic I'll break this news to you, too: I, like many, call it "Swamp Magnolia." Before you get all huffy or insulted know swamps are great places, without which you would have scarcely any

clean drinking water and would be walking in mud. Other names include laurel magnolia, swampbay, southern sweetbay, white-bay, white-laurel, and swamp laurel.



Sweetbay's blossom. Photo: J. Morton Galetto

Magnolia is primarily a Coastal Plain tree growing in states which border the Atlantic Ocean –from New Jersey to Georgia and in its southern reaches, as far west as Louisiana. Sweetbay magnolia habitats are characterized by acidic soils with generally poor drainage that are frequently flooded in winter or wet seasons. Freshwater coastal watersheds are great habitat for the tree.

Here in Southern New Jersey it is fairly common in lowland pine forests, coastal hardwood swamps, and rich hummocks with

standing water. It also grows in association with Atlantic white cedar, red maple, and blackgum.

However, magnolia seedlings do not do well with extended inundation. They succeed best with both dry and wet periods. The tree is a bit like Goldilocks, thriving in not too arid and not too moist, not too shady and not too sunny conditions – living on the edges.

In Southern New Jersey the tree is generally 10-20 tall but in its southern range it can reach up to 60 feet in height. The growing season here is 180 days whereas in the south it is 340 days, surely accounting for some degree of the size differences. It often has multiple trunks and can maintain a shrubby appearance.

Sweetbay magnolia is easily distinguished from other trees and shrubs by its semi-evergreen to evergreen leaves. In our region it drops its foliage in early winter, but in the south its leaves persist and are only released as new ones appear. The upper side of the oblong-lanceolate leaves is dark green and the lower side shows white pubescence -a botanical term for “covered in short soft hair” - or downy, and I would say nearly velveteen; this is diagnostic of the species.

The unfurled blossom is tight and erect, much like a new tulip bud. The creamy white blooms spread to reveal 9-12 petals. They open in the morning and close each night for up to 3 days. The flowers continue to spread and eventually look like a rusty splayed star. By the end of August they produce conelike fruits that contain bright red seeds. These begin as a sheathed cluster and as they mature become broadly spaced. All these transformations add to its visual appeal.



The graceful unfurled blossom of sweetbay magnolia.



*In mid-August the fruit clusters emerge and then separate.
Note the diagnostic whiter velvety underside of the leaf.
Photos: J. Morton Galetto*

Wildlife makes use of magnolia. Lepidopterist David Wagner identifies at least two species for which it is a host: the tiger swallowtail butterfly and the sweetbay silkmoth. Both of these lepidoptera are real beauties.



(please scroll down)



Sweetbay magnolia is the host plant of the: (Previous page) Eastern Tiger swallowtail/Papilio glaucus (photo J Morton Galetto) and (Above) Sweetbay silkmoth/Callosamia securifera (photo Laura Gaudette).

The seeds of sweetbay are favored by small mammals, deer, bear, cattle, and a host of birds including wild turkeys, bobwhite quail, eastern kingbirds, mockingbirds, robins, wood thrushes and red-eyed vireos. Beaver will feed on the cambium layer, which is the growing part of the trunk. Judy Kilpatrick relays that the sweetbay was known as the "beaver tree" by colonists since trappers dug the tender roots for beaver bait.

Woodworkers utilize the soft aromatic straight-grained wood for veneers, boxes,

furniture, venetian blinds, and the like. Dried leaves are added as flavoring for soups, sauces, and stews, much like the bay laurel, *Laurus nobilis*, that is bought in the spice section of stores as bay leaf.

Native Americans employed sweetbay magnolia in the treatment of ailments. Louisiana's Houma tribe took extracts from leaves and twigs, boiled them in water, and strained and cooled the liquid to treat "cold blood" (Moerman). The United States Department of Agriculture elaborates: "roots to treat colds, rheumatism, pleurisy, cough, consumption, typhoid fever, autumnal fever, and to prevent chills." The Rappahannock of Virginia collected leaves and bark and inhaled them as a hallucinogen (Speck Et al).

When sweetbay magnolia is in blossom, like Goldilocks I find things to be "just right"!

Sources:

Native American Ethnobotany, D. Moerman, Timber Press, Oregon, 1998

Speck, Frank G., R. B. Hassrick and E.S Carpenter 1942. Rappahannock Herbals, Folk-Lore and Science of Cures. Proceedings of the Delaware County Institute of Science.

Magnolia virginiana, David S. Priestler, USDA Factsheet

Trees of New Jersey and the Mid-Atlantic States, New Jersey
Department of Environmental Protection, Division of Parks
and Forestry

10 Best Magnolia Perfumes of All Time, by Baishali
Bhattacharya.

Unique Fact on Sweetbay Magnolia, Judy Kilpatrick, Home
and Garden, June 12, 2012.

Caterpillars of Eastern North America, David L. Wagner,
2005.

Limpert, Dana. 1993. Water gardening for wildlife.
Wildflower.