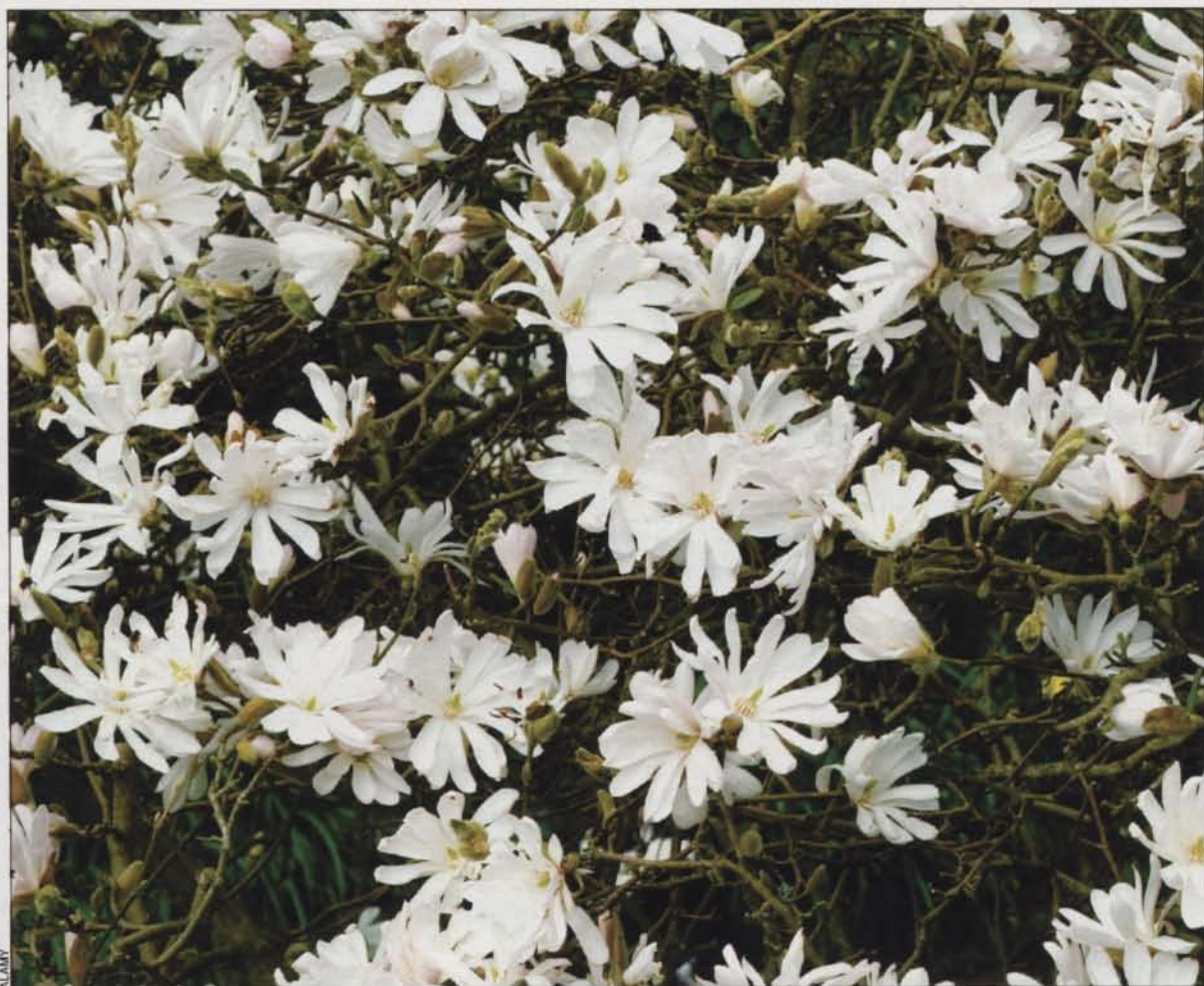


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WEEKEND
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**SARAH
JESSICA
PARKER
WHAT
A STYLE
GODDESS
DOES
NEXT**

PLUS MR LIZ JONES SPEAKS OYSHER FRITTERS A PUNK ROCKER'S LAIR THANDIE NEWTON



THE PLANTSMAN

Andy Sturgeon

Magnolias as a group are, without doubt, the royalty of spring-flowering plants. There are few trees or shrubs that have such huge, spectacularly luxurious flowers, but what I'd like to know is how, with hundreds of excellent species and varieties to choose from, did 99% of the ones you see end up being the same soft pink *Magnolia* × *soulangeana*, and how did they all end up in suburban front gardens?

But before these Trojans kick off some time next month, there are other, more interesting varieties to get excited about.

Nymans, the National Trust garden in Sussex, has been a good source of magnolia inspiration for me and is the birthplace of the rightly popular *M.* × *loebneri* 'Leonard Messel', with its delicate pale pink flowers. It also has some

of the proper tree varieties, including *M. campbellii* 'Darjeeling', and it is a great shame that these big guns are rarely deployed by gardeners. You can expect as much as a few feet of growth a year, which should endear it to most people looking for a tree to fill a hole reasonably quickly, and the initial conical shape will have broadened out by the time it reaches around 15m.

The leaves are large – but, of course, it is the flowers you are after. These form the shape of a cup and saucer, and are a wonderfully dark, sultry pink. They start appearing in late winter and can last until now. Given the size of the tree, it is a good idea to plant it near your house if you can, so you can get a proper

***Magnolia stellata* (above) is small, but its flowers are breathtaking**

eyeful from an upstairs windows.

Much easier to accommodate, though, and starting into flower in March, is *M. stellata*, which becomes a rounded shrub only a few metres high. The standard-issue one has star-shaped, pure white flowers that have a delicate-but-not-totally-thrilling scent (it's one of those plants that sometimes doesn't seem to have any fragrance at all, no matter how much sniffing you do). Thankfully, the flowers are breathtaking enough for this not to matter.

Magnolias generally prefer an acid soil, which matches their native habitat, and good companions are rhododendrons, camellias, enkianthus and the like. But, in fact, some, including *M.* × *loebneri* 'Leonard Messel' and *M. stellata*, will also be quite contented on an alkaline soil provided it doesn't dry out.