

## Tree of the Month, August 2014: Bigleaf magnolia (*Magnolia macrophylla*)

With the biggest simple leaf of any deciduous tree native to North America, *Magnolia macrophylla* stands out in the landscape. The leaves, which can be over 76 cm long, are green on top and silvery on the bottom, with wavy edges. The leaf shape can be described as oblong and obovate (wider at the tip than the base). The specific epithet *macrophylla* is from the Greek words for “big” and “leaf”.

Bigleaf magnolia is native to the southeastern United States and often grows in ravines and valleys where it is sheltered from high winds that can tear up its leaves. The tree can grow to 12 meters in height.

*Magnolia macrophylla* is sometimes called large-leaved cucumber tree—a reference to *Magnolia acuminata*, a smaller deciduous magnolia from the eastern US which has cucumber-shaped fruit. Ironically, bigleaf magnolia has round or egg-shaped fruits that bear little resemblance to cucumbers. The flowers of *Magnolia macrophylla* are white with dark red streaks inside the corolla near the base of the tepals and are quite large (25 cm across). The flowers that appear in late spring tend to grow high up in the canopy and can be difficult to see.

The first European to describe bigleaf magnolia was André Michaux, a French naturalist who served as Royal Botanist for Louis XVI. He was sent to North America to search for plants that would be useful to France. In 1786 he established a botanical garden twice the size of VanDusen (111 acres) in South Carolina, which served as his headquarters during his explorations.

There are two varieties of bigleaf magnolia: *Magnolia macrophylla* var. *ashei*, which is endemic to Florida, and var. *dealbata*, a native of Mexico that is on the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Red List as Endangered.

At VanDusen, we have five bigleaf magnolias in our Eastern North America Collection; one mature and four saplings.