

It's obvious. The signs of spring have been arriving somewhat earlier than we typically expect. For the past two weeks, I've received numerous inquiries from homeowners questioning the fate of their early leafing and flowering trees and shrubs. The question I'm hearing is, "What will happen to my tree or shrub if we experience a severe freeze?" Such a concern is certainly warranted.

About twenty years ago, Rita and I planted a saucer magnolia tree in our backyard. Saucer magnolia, *Magnolia x soulangiana*, is a stunning, hybrid, deciduous flowering ornamental tree. Rated hardy to USDA Zone 5, saucer magnolia's showy blossoms break the bleakness of winter. This magnificent tree exhibits a welcomed spring presence, radiating visual and aromatic qualities.



Saucer magnolia is a multi-stemmed tree, about twenty-five feet tall with a twenty to thirty foot spread, and bright, attractive gray bark. Growth rate is moderately fast but slows considerably as the tree reaches about twenty years of age. Large, fuzzy, green flower buds are carried through the winter at the tips of its branches. The blooms open in late winter to early spring before the leaves emerge. When in bloom, the tree is covered with thousands of beautiful, fragrant, saucer-shaped white flowers, deeply flushed with rose-pink or violet and measuring three-to-six inches in diameter. Because this species blooms extremely early, and due to Nebraska's fickle weather, its flowers are always subject to the potential threat of frost. This can be incredibly disappointing since one waits nearly

fifty-one weeks for the flowers to appear. The fact is over the past twenty years, we have been able to enjoy our magnolia's full beauty for perhaps seven of those years.



I am writing this column five days before it goes to press. Currently our magnolia tree is in full bloom— I might add, exceptionally early this year. From year to year this tree has bloomed sporadically. For example, in 2007, it began blooming

on March 28, and in 2010, the tree didn't start blooming until April 11. In 2012, the first blossoms appeared on March 18, and in 2014, we didn't see blossoms until April 12. Bear in mind, the photos I've attached to this column were taken five days ago. Every year, with bated breath, I wait to see what happens to this tree. Hopefully, what occurred on April 13, 2014, won't repeat this year.

As previously mentioned, on April 12, 2014, our beautiful magnolia tree began blooming. A soft warm breeze embraced the air creating, what I'd call, a perfect spring day. The following day, we awakened to an ominous driving rainstorm from the north. Quickly, the rain changed to snow. By noon, the thermometer dipped well below freezing; blizzard-like conditions prevailed, and our brief, beautiful spring landscape quickly vanished, transforming it to a panorama of ice and snow. Later that day, as I gazed on our once beautiful magnolia tree, my heart sank. Ravaged by the torrential wind and snow, its large flowers lay scattered throughout the yard. Those that remained attached were frozen stiff, destined never to bloom.

Knowing what has happened to our magnolia tree over the past twenty years, one might ask, “Would you still plant a saucer magnolia?” To that, I would answer a resounding, “Yes!” However, I might consider planting cultivars that are known to bloom later in the season such as ‘Brozzonii’, ‘Speciosa’, ‘Ballerina’, ‘Ann’, ‘Jane’, ‘Rustica Rubra’, ‘Big Pink’, or ‘Verbanica’.

For now, the fate of our saucer magnolia rests in the hands of Mother Nature. Unfortunately, the weather forecast for this weekend is frost. With a little good fortune, this may be one of the years we get to enjoy its magnificent beauty from beginning to end. Time will tell. Trust me, when saucer magnolia flowers are undamaged, their show is spectacular!