



Alabama's *TREASURED* Forests
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Bigleaf Magnolia

(*Magnolia macrophylla*)

By Fred Nation, Environmental Services, Baldwin County

Ever wonder how a tree gets its name? Not much doubt about this one . . . Bigleaf magnolia is a small-to-medium-sized, deciduous tree with an irregular crown, often with multiple stems from the ground. The leaves seem impossibly large, up to a yard long, and a foot wide. The leaf bases are “auriculate,” with a pair of earlike lobes. The undersides are chalky blue-green. In winter, after the big leaves are on the ground, they are often visible from quite a distance as a curious bleached, almost white area on the forest floor.

The late spring or early summer flowers are creamy white, fragrant, with purple streaks at the bases of the petals, and they are often a foot across. They are a good match for the leaves: *Magnolia macrophylla* has the distinction of producing both the largest simple leaves and the largest single flowers of any North American tree. The fruits of bigleaf magnolia hold still another surprise for visitors who walk up on them in summer or fall: they are a bit larger than a tennis ball, scaly, almost perfectly globose [ball-shaped], and they are rose pink in color.

Bigleaf magnolia, also called “cowcumber magnolia,” was first described and named by French naturalist Andre Michaux in June 1795, near Charlotte, North Carolina. In Alabama they are widely scattered in rich moist forests throughout most of the state. Wherever they occur, from Virginia to Ohio and south to the Gulf Coast, population densities are low, and they are considered to be an uncommon tree. In Florida, the smaller, more shrubby Ashe magnolia is rare and endemic to the panhandle. Some authorities consider it to be a separate species, *Magnolia ashei*, while others view it as a subspecies of the southeastern populations.

Along with its relatives, bigleaf magnolia has a distinguished history as a medicinal plant. During [America's] civil war, Dr. Francis Porcher, a Charleston physician, wrote a book called *Resources of the Southern Fields and Forests*, to suggest substitutes for medicines lost to the Confederacy by the Union blockade. He suggested it “as a stimulant, aromatic tonic, with

considerable diaphoretic powers. The leaves, steeped in brandy, or a decoction of them, are valuable in pectoral affections, recent cold, etc. The tincture, made by macerating the fresh cones and seeds, or bark of root in brandy, which best extracts its virtues, is much used as a popular remedy in rheumatism and inflammatory gout.” The Cherokee Indians have used the bark of bigleaf magnolia as an analgesic, to cure pain including toothache, and as a treatment for gastrointestinal disturbances.

When encountered in the forest, bigleaf magnolia is a pleasant and surprising sight. Container-grown stocks are now sometimes available from growers and garden centers. They can be dramatic and interesting additions to our parks and home landscapes as ornamentals – if provided with a sheltered location to protect those huge leaves from damaging winds. The Alabama state champion *Magnolia macrophylla*, newly declared in 2014, is a giant of its kind. Located in Wilcox County, it measures 42 inches in trunk circumference, 58 feet tall, with an average crown spread of 37 feet. 🌳



Photos by Fred Nation