

Magnolia

Who in the World is Kay Parris?

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In 1991, I did not know that *Magnolia grandiflora* was a hexaploid species. I did not know that magnolias were divided into subgenera. I had no concern for whether *Michelia* retained the status of a genus or whether it would be lumped into *Magnolia*. And then I planted a seed.

September 1991 was a busy month for the propagation department at Gilbert's Nursery. We were trying to wrap up cutting production of broadleaf evergreens and clear out the propagation houses for the next round of cuttings that would ride out the winter in the houses with supplemental heat. In the midst of the routine that I would come to know so well, I was given an oppor-



tunity to go on an adventure involving collecting cuttings of *Magnolia grandiflora* 'Little Gem'. While the rest of the crew was working on something fairly nondescript, like *Ilex crenata* 'Helleri', I would get to take a helper and travel to Bold Springs Nursery in Monroe, Georgia. I was appreciative of the diversion from the normal daily routine that nursery owners James Gilbert and Susi Strong had given me because I had developed an affinity for magnolias as a young horticulturist.

My earliest memory of *Magnolia grandiflora* takes me back to my childhood and the days after my grandmother in Saluda, South Carolina, slipped on her front walkway while retrieving the newspaper. The entire family gathered at the hospital in nearby Greenwood, South Carolina, and learned her hip was broken and she would be in for a lengthy recovery. Rather than subject me to the miseries of the hospital atmosphere, my parents took turns entertaining me on the grounds. The only mental picture I have of that day was a large stately southern magnolia with an open inner canopy with perfectly spaced sinuous branches that were just right for a kid to climb. I also remember discovering the "cones", which were great for imaginary hand grenades. I now insist that my students properly refer to these as aggregates of follicles, but enjoy hearing how many of them also used the magnificent fruiting structures to bomb an imaginary nemesis.

My grandmother lived to be 88, and needed the assistance of a walker from that day in 1974 forward, but this accident was not her greatest trial. That we would share 14 years later. In 1988, my junior year at Clemson University, my mother, Katherine Killingsworth Parris, lost a brief but rugged battle with influenza and pneumonia. The summer that followed offered me another opportunity to spend time with southern magnolias as I interned on the grounds of Milliken and Company Research Headquarters at home in Spartanburg, SC. This corporate landscape is a sprawling arboretum with collections of plants chosen by Dr. Michael Dirr. I believe some sort of peace came to me during those days in May 1988 as a result of the solitude of forming monotonous mowing patterns while carefully maneuvering a Toro Groundskeeper around the broadly draped, flowering branches of noble magnolias.

But getting back to 1991, when my helper Raul and I had collected something close to our goal of 5000 *Magnolia grandiflora* 'Little Gem' cuttings. We were tired as we had made the trip from Chesnee, SC, to the Atlanta area the night before and had gone to see a Braves baseball game before turning in for the night. That next day we were already in the fields at Bold Springs Nursery by 7 a.m. to take those cuttings, and late as it was, we needed to get on the road for home. As we were adjusting the piles of cuttings within the moistened burlap, I came across one aggregate filled with red, fleshy, aril-covered seeds. I had not noticed too many of these while we collected cuttings. I found it interesting, so I stuck it in my pocket. Upon our return to Gilbert's Nursery, we hauled the *M. g.* 'Little Gem' cuttings into the walk-in cooler and clocked out after nearly a day and a half.

I forgot I had the seed in my pocket until the next morning, but luckily discovered them before they ended up in the wash. I remember the next two days or more were totally devoted to preparing the cuttings that we had collected, but I worked in a moment to rub the aril away from the 12 seeds that had serendipitously found their way into my hands. I sowed these directly into an open flat with no stratification treatment. I remember saying to the seeds, "If any of you turn out to be worthy, I'll name you after my mother." From these seeds, 9 plants germinated, and were shifted into one-, and subsequently, three-gallon containers leading up to September 1993. I have always believed these progeny are a cross of *M. g.* 'Little Gem' × *M. g.* 'Bracken's Brown Beauty'. As seedlings, they were an interesting assortment, ranging from a 6" runt to a 6' renegade. But, there in the middle, was a 3' plant with lateral branches produced every 1-2" and wavy narrow leaves with deep brown indumentum. There was more to this plant, though, for it had 4 flowers that developed that Sep-

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M. grandiflora 'Kay Parris' foliage

tember, just 24 months from the time the seed was sown. At that moment I proclaimed this precocious little plant *Magnolia grandiflora* 'Kay Parris', but was hesitant to officially put that on the label until we watched it a bit longer. So, like a teen-age boy who falls in love for the first time, I wrote down Parris Select #1 and looked at it every single day.

Gilbert's Nursery has employed many fine individuals through the years, but it was our fortune in 1994 to have Stephen Burns come to work and bring his grafting skills with him. By now I had potted "Kay" up into a ten-gallon container and had prepared a few air layers as back-up plants in case something happened to the original. I asked Stephen what he thought. It wasn't long before Stephen was demonstrating T-budding of *M. grandiflora*, using scion wood from "Kay". In our first training session, Stephen, Jerry Blackwell, Bob Smart and I successfully budded 36 out of 40. Stephen's confidence in the plant gave me the confidence to ask others for their opinion. The 1995 Southern Region International Plant Propagator's Society meeting gave me the opportunity to put these 1994 T-budded plants into the hands of Dr. Michael Dirr, and Dr. J.C. Raulston. I believe each plantsman approved of these plants. Dr. Dirr planted his at the University of Georgia Horticulture Research Farm, where it still resides today. He was also kind enough to give it a listing under the name 'Parris Selection' in the 1998 5th Edition of his Manual of Woody Landscape Plants. The recently published 6th Edition uses the cultivar name 'Kay Parris'. The plant that I placed in the hands of Dr. J.C. Raulston is what led to the rest of this story.

After arriving in Raleigh, North Carolina, "Kay" fell under the watchful eye of Pat McCracken. Pat was apparently impressed. In 2000 he phoned me to inquire about the details of the plant's origin because he was preparing a submission to the Field Notes portion of American Nurseryman magazine. He proclaimed that "Kay" ranked in his top three *M. grandiflora* cultivars and told me in time it would become as well known as any cultivar. I didn't know Pat very well at that time, but I did recall talking about magnolias with him at several past IPPS meetings, and I knew that Pat knew magnolias. I was honored and humbled by Pat's assertion. I was running a landscape design business in Spartanburg, SC, at that time and occasionally specified "Kay" on landscape projects around town just to keep it going locally. I photocopied the page from Ameri-

can Nurserymen to distribute to each client that agreed to have a “Kay” planted. In addition to Gilbert’s Nursery, Roebuck Wholesale Nursery and Landscaping was propagating the plant to supply the limited local demand I was trying to initiate. But I did not know how busy Pat had been. While at Taylor’s Nursery in Raleigh, Pat quickly bulked up numbers and found interested buyers of lining-out stock. Sam Allen of Tarheel Native Trees and Julian Perkins of The Tree Source, both in North Carolina, were the first regular producers of 10-gallon or larger stock. The first specimens of *Magnolia* ‘Kay Parris’ planted on the campus of Spartanburg Community College were actually shipped in from The Tree Source in Greenville, NC, five hours away, because no landscape-sized specimens were available in South Carolina. This scarcity of availability actually helped me promote the plant locally because if it was being grown across state lines, it must be pretty good.

Where were the first *M.* ‘Kay Parris’ planted? My backyard, Gilbert’s Nursery and the front yard of my mother’s sister, of course, but I wanted to tie the plant to my mother in historical fashion. Kay Parris was a physical education teacher who coached basketball early in her career, and was an athlete in her own right. She played for Saluda High School and was captain of the 1953 team that played for the South Carolina state championship. Saluda lost to Orangeburg, the home of Claudia Wannamaker, who is also honored by a popular *M. grandiflora*. Ten years later, as a coach, Kay led Fairforest



Katherine Killingsworth Parris

High School to the same event, against the same opponent, with the same outcome. The following year she became the coach at Dorman High School, which absorbed the attendance area of Fairforest and two other schools. So just outside the gymnasium of what is now Fairforest Middle School, a ‘Kay Parris’ magnolia now stands and she anchors the corner of the gymnasium at the newly built Dorman High School as well.

If those were the only places that a plant I named was planted, I would be gratified. But thanks to Pat McCracken, “Kay” is not just planted in locations that I frequent. Thanks to those of you that listened to Pat and gave “Kay” a try, my children can sit at the computer and type the name of a grandmother that didn’t live to see them born and get over 11,000 results in some search engines.

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So, I planted a seed. I am writing this article because something led me to plant that seed. Because of that seed, I chose to research *Magnolia* as part of my belated return to full-time education. Because of that seed, I have the opportunity to work with the best and brightest professors, researchers, students, and enthusiasts. Because of that seed, I traveled to China in 2009 for the International Symposium on the Family Magnoliaceae and had the privilege of meeting many of you. Because I planted that seed, breeders are using its germplasm to create intersectional hybrids. I have been humbled to hear people say that I found a great plant. Maybe I did, but I would rather believe I put a great name on a plant, and it lived up to the name that it was given. In addition to this plant, a scholarship fund and my oldest daughter share her name. Each is quite remarkable.

As time has gone by I have been pleased that “Kay” has taken a place alongside the other *M. grandiflora* matriarchs such as ‘Claudia Wannamaker’, ‘Edith Bogue’, ‘Phyllis Barrow’, and ‘Margaret Davis’. Knowing that there are real people behind the inspiration and existence of cultivated plants makes the hope of future discoveries and honorary tributes a noble endeavor in my mind. It is very difficult to describe the reward of seeing a whimsical notion come alive and make its way across the waters of this earth. In North Carolina, New Jersey, Virginia, Australia, Belgium, the United Kingdom, China, Canada, Colombia, and elsewhere, people may be saying, “Who in the world is Kay Parris?”

Now you know.



Sarah (10) and Katie (13) Parris pose with a specimen of *M. grandiflora* ‘Kay Parris’ on the grounds of Spartanburg Community College, Mother’s Day 2010