

Sweet Bay Magnolia

Magnolia virginiana is an evergreen or deciduous tree that grows to 100 ft tall, native to the lowlands and swamps of the Atlantic coastal plain of the eastern United States, from Florida to Long Island, New York. Whether it is deciduous, or evergreen depends on climate; it is evergreen in areas with milder winters in the south of its range (zone 7 southward) and is semi-evergreen or deciduous further north. The leaves are alternate, simple (not lobed or pinnate), with entire margins, 6–12 cm long, and 3–5 cm wide. The bark is smooth and gray, with the inner bark mildly scented, the scent reminiscent of the bay laurel spice.

The flowers are creamy white, 8–14 cm diameter, with 6-15 petal-like tepals. The flowers carry a very strong vanilla scent that can sometimes be noticed several hundred yards away. The fruit is a fused aggregate of follicles, 3–5 cm long, pinkish-red when mature, with the follicles splitting open to release the 1 cm long seeds. The seeds are black but covered by a thinly fleshy red coat, which is attractive to some fruit-eating birds; these swallow the seeds, digest the red coating, and disperse the seeds in their droppings.

