

Magnolia

In spring, *Magnolia grandiflora* produces the most beautiful, creamy white flowers that have a delicate, intoxicating scent. The problem, however, is that these evergreen trees grow into giants, so while the flowers are large and long lasting, it is difficult to enjoy them when you're at ground level. Fortunately there is a relatively new hybrid called *Magnolia grandiflora* 'Little Gem' that grows into a more 'people-friendly' size that allows us to get up close to the magnificent blooms. Its leaves are leathery and oval-shaped, with a brown underside, and its flowers have satin soft petals with a spot of red under the yellow stamens. They are, hands down, the prettiest flowers a tree can produce.

'Little Gem' forms a compact, pyramidal tree that can eventually grow to a height of about 8 m and a width of 5 m – but it will take a long time before it reaches these dimensions because it is a slow grower. (This is not a problem when it comes to flowers because it starts blooming from an early age.) If it does start to exceed the available space, you simply trim back the branches and it will reward you by growing denser foliage.

The reduced size of 'Little Gem' makes it suitable for smaller urban gardens, plus it is comfortable growing in a large pot so even very small gardens can accommodate one. In fact, it is an exceptionally elegant and ornate choice for a large pot. In a formal garden, a neat row of these trees with their large, glossy leaves creates a restful scene, and when they are in bloom it is an awesome sight.

WHEN DO THEY BLOOM?

Flowers appear in spring, and then at various times throughout the year.

MOST SUITABLE CLIMATE

Magnolias prefer a cooler climate with high rainfall. In cold winter gardens, 'Little Gem' is a good choice because it starts blooming after the worst of the cold and frost has passed, avoiding the possibility of flower damage.



Magnolia grandiflora 'Little Gem'

WHAT THEY NEED

- **LOCATION:** direct sunlight to semi-shade. Magnolias have an invasive root system and should not be planted too close to structures. (Keep them away from your swimming pool.)
- **SOIL:** rich, loamy soil that drains well, enriched with lots of compost. Provide a generous mulch of organic material and replenish it regularly. Mulch keeps the soil cool and moist and suppresses weeds, removing the need to dig in the vicinity of the tree. This is especially important because magnolia root systems are sensitive and don't like to be disturbed.
- **WATER:** irrigate regularly and deeply during summer (medium to high water consumption).
- **FERTILIZING:** feed young trees in spring and then every six to eight weeks thereafter until the end of summer. Use slow release 3:1:5. Potted trees will thrive on regular doses of water-soluble foliar feed.

IN A NUTSHELL

- ✓ Beautiful flowering trees.
- ✓ Suitable for cool climates.
- ✓ Prefer high rainfall.
- ✓ Easy but slow growers.

PLANT THIS TOO

Magnolia x soulangeana is a small, deciduous tree that grows to approximately 6 x 6 m, making it ideal for a small garden or a town-house-style garden. Its many lateral branches extend from a central trunk and, starting in late winter, they carry exceedingly pretty tulip-shaped flowers in various shades of pink and white. From a distance, the multitude of large flowers covering the tree makes it look as if a swarm of exotic birds has descended on it. The light green leaves appear after the flowers. The foliage never becomes very dense so the tree does not cast much of a shadow. This means perennials, shrubs and even bulbs can be planted quite close to its base.

