
StarTribune Editorial

Our perspective

Star flowers

Asking a bush to be a tree

A magnolia in Minnesota is an improbability. Yet somehow the Southerner in the backyard has held on for 16 years, forsaking youthful frailty for towering majesty. A foot-tall bush has laughed off icy odds to take on a gangly vastness. Thus every year it seems less audacious to look forward to the magnolia's marvel. What once seemed unlikely has become the expected herald of spring: the scent and shout of star flower.

The winter was mostly mild, as if to atone for harsher weather in the heart. And as the soil warmed and the winds softened, the yearly blast of magnolian blossom seemed a sure thing. Still, there's intrigue in the waiting and wondering: How can such small tufts of bud bring forth such extravagance? How can such a bony tangle of branch render such massive thrill?

The Southerner declines to answer — except with the annual explosion. Just yesterday it began to burst forth yet again in a surge of astonishing stars — Mother Nature's answer to the crueler explosions of civilization. The magnolia's magnificence looms as large as any of the world's shadows and sorrows — if only the shadow-dwellers will savor its brief moment.

This year our now-and-again gardener is savoring with special fervor. Soon after the towers toppled last fall, she approached the magnolia with a proposition: Sixteen years on, might the calamitous bush consider becoming a tree? It was a lot to

ask, of course — too much, the gardener feared. But disarray beyond the back yard fence stirred a need for order within: With pruning shears and saw, she hoped, a new beauty might be coaxed from chaos. Thus were long-hanging limbs lopped, and untenable branches banished. Randomness was snipped into a semblance of symmetry, and what was once a lovely hulk of a bush took on an uplifting elegance.

So this year's magnolia speaks with a new splendor — proving that human meddling need not always lead to muddle. The pruning was a risk, the gardener will grant, but it seemed a wiser course than blithe neglect. Growing up invariably involves loss, she told herself — of friends and routines, of hopes and dreams. Old habits can weigh heavily as one reaches for the light. What living being can get through life without bearing a loss, sacrificing a fragment of the past?

Not a one. Sometimes it takes a walk through the dark to stumble upon this truth. Now and then it's revealed by a blast of dust or heart-break or blossom. Occasionally the pruning shears descend without warning, and our lives are reshaped shockingly without notice. But however it happens, sooner or later the fact becomes clear: Inevitable and transforming, loss has a way of tuning the ear to spring's white song. Even in an utterly changed world, the great magnolian exultation still rings out — declaring the improbable grace that outshines all sorrow.