

StarTribune Editorial

Our perspective

Star flowers

Seizing the fleeting moment

A magnolia in Minnesota seems an improbability. Its bony delicacy appears an unfit match for the North's brutish winters, the coming of its April blossoms more theoretical than certain. This year its report of spring's arrival hovered half-unfurled in the drizzle for days — as though waiting for a sadness to lift

The melancholy can't be banished by a single sunny day, but neither can it keep the magnolia from its marvels. Now that the mists have lifted and the winds at last blow warm, the tree fulfills its white destiny. Whatever tears are shed in the kitchen, beyond the back door springtime weeps with its usual joy. The magnolia, it seems plain, is uninclined to mimic the human proclivity for lamentation — and for missing Mother Nature's lavish moments.

It's been 17 years since the magnolia took root in Minnesota soil, and it's astonishing to see how it has thrived. Once a slip of a bush, it has outlived ice and gale and hacksaw — growing over time into a breathtaking tree. Oddly, this stirs a soul-pang in the gardener: When exactly was it, she wonders, that the shrub became sylvan? When did its pre-adolescent gawk give way to pure grandness? And now that it has been shepherded through youth and pruned toward a gorgeous adulthood, what more is there for the gardener to do? She regards with yearning its fleeting whiteness, knowing that in mere days she must find solace in a torrent of tulips — which will follow the magnolia blooms into hasty wither.

Oh, the world rushes by too quickly — bestowing its blessings even as it snatches them back. The gardener walks through the garden haunted by ephemerality. It makes no sense to her, really: She's not growing older, so far as she can tell — a few silver hairs notwithstanding. But the magnolia — and those beautiful girls! Just yesterday the tiny tangle of twigs was but a possibility. Just yesterday the girls

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were swaddled in her arms, nestling against her in the old Kentucky rocking chair as she sang the pretty horses song.

And today? Today the bush is a towering tree, the girls well on their way to womanhood. They've outgrown the rocking chair, and the song. Their own gawk and gangle has given way to lilt and a distant look — a loveliness she can only look upon. With wistfulness and baffled pride, she learns to sing no longer — to forsake inquiry for observation.

So the gardener walks the neighborhood, counting small magnolias and small children. "Savor this moment," she says to the tenders of both. "Soon they will grow beyond your reach." So keen is her sense of time's racing pulse that she can't help but speak: No matter how fiercely we love it, life slips through our embrace.

Mother Nature may be the maker of miracles, but she is also the mistress of change. None of her magic persists beyond its day and hour. Not fire or ice, magnolia blossom or a child's first word sustains its splendor forever. This is something the magnolia knows — and the swaddled child as well. They don't waste their time fretting or fighting, but indulge instead in the glory of becoming. Too often the grown-up gardeners forget to attend to the moment, and the once-in-a-lifetime happenings of a day are lost to us. As the world bursts forth in white and the newest children revel in the spring, may we seize the days we chance to lose.