

# Laura Dwight's Magnolias

*Judith Leet*

**Determined to halt the decline of her beloved Back Bay neighborhood, civic activist Laura Dwight launched a community-wide drive to plant hundreds of saucer magnolias along Boston's elegant Commonwealth Avenue during the early 1960s**

Laura Dwight's idea was to make Boston's Back Bay, particularly Commonwealth Avenue, look as beautiful in spring as Washington's Tidal Basin—a great public welcome to the new season. She foresaw the effect of having the whole avenue bloom at once with a row of the most floriferous of trees, the saucer magnolia—its showy flowers a rich pink at the base and a creamy white at the petal tips. And the trees were to be democratically planted in the front yard of everyone's nineteenth century Victorian brownstone.

In the 1960s, Miss Dwight, a resident of the Back Bay who was then in her sixties, conceived of such a scheme for beautifying Commonwealth Avenue and had the energy and persuasiveness to carry it out. One contemporary who knew Dwight in gardening and horticultural circles describes her as a very appealing person: "It was like being pushed by a fairy or an elf; you couldn't say no to her. I'm sure that's why there are so many magnolias on Commonwealth Avenue." A younger friend remembers her as "forceful, even pushy—but pushy in the right direction."

From her apartment on Commonwealth Avenue, Laura Dwight observed the once-

elegant Back Bay section of Boston deteriorating all around her, and she became aroused, even irate at the apathy and detachment of local residents. Hoping to help reverse this downward trend, she devoted her considerable energies to neighborhood-improvement projects and became an early member and later an officer of the Neighborhood Association of the Back Bay (NABB), a group working to restore stability to the area.

An activist by nature, she first involved herself in small-scale beautification projects—organizing house tours and garden tours, and front- and back-yard contests to award prizes to those who had created the most appealing city gardens (often judged by officials from the Massachusetts Horticultural Society). Such events encouraged residents to clean up, plant, and care for their often overlooked yards. Although she at this point had no garden of her own, she sponsored most of these events and signed up other sponsors, inviting them to a formal tea, often catered, at her comfortable apartment, filled with paintings, antiques, and mementoes of her forebears.

With the hearty approval of the NABB, Laura Dwight carried out her first large-scale street-planting project in the fall of 1963. She personally rang doorbells and convinced owners—some of them friends, others total strangers—that it was a good idea to plant one or several magnolia trees in their front yards

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*Portrait of Laura Dwight by Bradford Bachrach.  
Courtesy of Anne H. Jennings.*

and to participate in a collective, street-long display. She offered to provide free labor to plant the trees on a designated weekend, the material to enrich the soil, and a young tree, which would be delivered to the door. The resident only had to agree to the idea in principle and to pay a nominal sum for the young tree.

Although some absentee landlords could not be located, a majority of those approached agreed to participate. The residents at that time were far from a homogeneous group—students, young married couples, transients in rooming houses, administrators of junior colleges, and small-business people. But the idea had a logic and appeal of its own, and Laura Dwight motivated many to participate. One supporter of the planting, for example, was Emil “Sax” Rohmer, involved in real estate in the Back Bay, who donated two magnolias to be planted at 3 Commonwealth Avenue, a building rented by the French consulate and owned by Oliver S. Ames. Esther Ames, Oliver’s wife, recalls planting a magnolia at 20 Gloucester Street and remembers that everyone in the neighborhood had heard about the street planting, either through the NABB or by word of mouth.

Much discussion took place in meetings over the merits of *Magnolia Xsoulangiana* versus those of *Magnolia stellata* for the Boston climate; some argued against the early magnolias altogether, nominating other species that would be less susceptible to an early-spring frost (the white magnolia petals quickly turning a dismal brown); some favored later-blooming native dogwoods (*Cornus florida*); others debated which species would be better for sunny and which for shady locations. A compromise was reached, but Laura Dwight’s idea of the uniform planting of the colorful, large-petaled saucer magnolia (*Magnolia Xsoulangiana*) prevailed for the sunny (north) side of Commonwealth.

Eyewitnesses recall two successive years of planting between 1963 and 1965: the first

year saw the saucer magnolias installed on the sunny side of the street along with a few *Magnolia stellata*, the second year, dogwoods (*Cornus florida*) planted on the shady side. And, in retrospect, many would argue that the basic decision was correct: *Magnolia Xsoulangiana* is a neater, more compact tree than the dogwoods, which have a looser, lighter habit and often a less exuberant display.

When asked about the project in 1981, Laura’s sister, Frances Dwight, then in her eighties, wrote: “Laura had read somewhere that Boston was about as far north as the magnolias could be expected to pull through the winter.” Laura Dwight had also admired the magnolias already well established and blooming profusely in front of a few Back Bay townhouses, such as the *Magnolia denudata* at 6 Commonwealth, the residence of Mrs. Montgomery Sears (now the Boston Center for Adult Education).

There was, in fact, even before Laura Dwight’s campaign something of a tradition of planting trees in the Back Bay. A long-term resident recalls that the original owners, in early summer, would place white dust covers over the furniture and depart for their country homes. Therefore, they deliberately planted in the small front yards of their city houses a tree that would come into flower while they were still at home to benefit from it.

Witnesses of the street plantings in the 1960s give Laura Dwight full credit as the moving force behind the project: she was the one who made arrangements with nurseries to truck in plants; she arranged for MIT students living in a fraternity house on Commonwealth Avenue to donate manpower; she made sure that seedling trees were given a proper start with loam, peat moss, mulch, watering (since the Back Bay was gravel-filled land, this improvement of the soil was prudent to ensure long-term success).

An attractive price was set: eight dollars bought a smallish tree for those who were willing to wait for results (and even a young



*The magnolias planted on Commonwealth Avenue as a result of Laura Dwight's campaign were by no means the first to be planted there. This Magnolia denudata, which stood on the Sarah G. Sears estate, was photographed in 1933 by John C. Marr. From the Archives of the Arnold Arboretum.*

saucer magnolia produces a few choice blooms); those who wanted quicker results bought a larger tree at twenty dollars. According to Frances Dwight, "residents' gardeners were brought from as far away as Beverly and Duxbury to help the student workers. Laura found it very time-consuming, a great deal of detail with owners and nurserymen was involved."

The late Mrs. Edwin Webster, a venerable resident of Back Bay, with a townhouse on the corner of Commonwealth and Dartmouth, who always kept a colorful display of freshly blooming flowers in her conservatory for passersby to enjoy, also agreed to participate in the collective street planting. Her gardeners, imported from her estate in Chestnut Hill, planted three sizeable specimens of *Magnolia Xsoulangiana* that now take their place with the others planted by Laura Dwight—all now forming a long row of thriving, mature trees on Commonwealth Avenue.

Although many people have the impression that "hundreds" of trees make up the display, a recent survey shows that there are roughly as few as five and as many as fifteen magnolias on the sunny side of each long block of Commonwealth Avenue. In thrifty Boston fashion, the planting uses rather limited resources to make an effective, even dazzling, display. And twenty-five years after the planting, the late-April appearance of the pure-white and rich-pink blooms is one of the memorable spring sights in Boston—especially recommended for a leisurely walk on a balmy spring evening.

### **The Dwight Family**

Although many committee members assumed she was a native Bostonian because she participated so actively in many community projects, Laura Dwight was neither born nor raised in Boston and lived in the Back Bay only during her later years. Her roots did extend back nine generations in Massachusetts, however, to John Dwight, who settled

in Dedham in 1634. (Twenty-eight of John Dwight's descendants had attended Yale by 1860, and one of these, Timothy Dwight, became president of Yale in 1795.)

Laura Dwight was born in Detroit, Michigan, in 1899, one of two daughters of Percy Dwight and Grace Buel Dwight. Colonel Percy Dwight was at one time president of Wilson Body Company, makers of wagon and carriage bodies, a prosperous company founded by his father, who owned considerable real estate in Detroit and Jackson, Michigan. (The two eldest Fisher brothers, who later founded the Fisher Body Company and became principal stockholders in General Motors, worked as young men for Percy Dwight.) The family summered in Williamstown, Massachusetts, on a large estate called Hillside House (now torn down), with well groomed gardens, memorable roses, riding stables, and dogs—including a decorated German shepherd who had served his country as a message dispatcher in World War I.

The two daughters, Laura and Frances, were educated by a German governess (both sisters could recite German poetry—Schiller, Goethe, Heine—all their lives) and traveled extensively in Europe, a then common educational path for daughters of prominent families. Neither sister married, and they were referred to, in the polite phrase of the period, as "maiden ladies." Both of independent means, Laura devoted herself as a volunteer to Republican politics and women's clubs; Frances was an accomplished horsewoman, amateur painter, and supporter of animal welfare, particularly interested in saving whales and seals.

Accustomed to many servants, two or three in help, the Dwight sisters never learned the practical survival skills of cooking or homemaking. Visitors to their Boston apartment noted that neither sister was able to make their meals, and that even making a simple sandwich posed a challenge. A much younger friend recalled that the Dwights' teas were legendary, especially when the sisters

were advancing in years. "Usually when you are invited to tea, especially in a proper Boston home, you expect tea and something in it. At Laura's, you might or might not get something to eat—and you might not even get the tea." Members of her garden club agree that Laura was clearly accustomed to someone else's making the tea for her. The many Boston ladies whom she mobilized respected her ability to get results—while shaking their heads in fond disbelief at her minimal skills at entertaining.

Encouraged by the enthusiasm generated by the street plantings, and planning to do more such projects, Laura Dwight organized and became first president of the Back Bay Garden Club in 1967. The fledgling club was soon asked to exhibit at the prestigious annual flower show of the Massachusetts Horticultural Society—to face the stiff competition of long-established clubs. The new group developed plans for a small urban garden, incorporating a real, albeit tiny, Japanese car into the exhibit, displayed behind a trellised carport, with many apricot tulips, grape hya-

cinths, a flowering dogwood, and brickwork to enhance the setting. After some very active disagreements among members about how to carry out the plans—some threatened to resign on the spot—Laura Dwight diplomatically calmed everyone. To the members' unfeigned surprise, the exhibit was judged a skillful solution to the design problem, was photographed for the *Boston Globe*, and won a blue ribbon.

Some of her motivation for neighborhood improvement might have come from personal experience. After tripping on the broken bricks of a Boston sidewalk and breaking her leg, she sued the City of Boston for damages. "She was a gutsy lady to fight City Hall," her cousin Douglas Campbell remarked, "but she won the \$4,000 she sued for."

Her sense of community involved her, as a founding member, in the Friends of the Public Garden—to aid in the rescue of the once well manicured Boston park that had fallen into weedy neglect. And her early interest in the environment—at a time when very few people had even heard of "ecology"—led her to found the "Order of Preservation of Clean Air," or, as members called it, "Citizens for Clean Air," one of her less successful ventures. When the group decided to disband, a surplus of \$300 in the treasury caused some amused consternation among the members: no one knew how to dispose of the surplus in a way that would contribute to cleaning the air. One of the members and a close friend, Irene Pitz, remembers Laura Dwight fondly: "Laura was always interested in 'good works.'"

Among these good works, she was Program Chairman for the Women's City Club, arranging for guest speakers; a director of the Gibson House, a Victorian museum on Beacon Street; and a member of the Colonial Dames and of the Junior League. Like all other Boston ladies, Laura Dwight devotedly attended the Boston Symphony Orchestra's Friday afternoon concerts.



Laura Dwight photographed in the Back Bay during a neighborhood backyard-garden contest.

In addition to their distinguished Dwight lineage, Laura and Frances Dwight were also ninth in descent from one John Mason, born in England in 1601, who settled in Dorchester, Massachusetts, in the early seventeenth century. The two sisters were the last surviving members of their immediate family. Toward the end of their lives, each sister expressed in private, to the same family advisor, her worry about dying and leaving the other sister to cope alone. The two elderly sisters died within five days of each other, in 1983.

### The Species Selected

Laura Dwight and her committee selected *Magnolia*  $\times$  *soulangiana* for their street planting, the first magnolia hybrid and one that became immediately popular after its development in the 1820s, the result of a cross between two long-cultivated Asian species. Experts believe that the oldest magnolia fossils are on the order of one hundred million years old, making *Magnolia* one of the oldest genera of flowering plants. Since these fossils are very similar to species still in existence, the plant is thought to have undergone only relatively minor evolutionary change over the millennia; magnolias exhibit one of the simplest types of flowering structures, with sepals and petals that are similar, overlapping in whorls of three; with stamens arranged in spirals; and with single, unfused pistils.

Over the ages, magnolias were mainly pollinated by beetles (*Nitidulidæ* spp.), which also underwent little adaptation over inconceivably large spans of time. Together, the magnolia and its beetle pollinators have survived the ages. The beetle is thought to penetrate the closed bud, crawling between the tight petals and entering the flower chamber to pollinate the receptive stigma—the stamens shedding their pollen after the flower bud opens and the stigmas have been fertilized. This sequential ripening of the male and female parts of a flower prevents self-fertilization from taking place.

Producing the largest flowers of any woody plants in the Temperate Zone (*Magnolia macrophylla*), magnolias have undoubtedly been admired by human beings since prehistory. Evidence suggests that the Chinese cultivated flowering magnolias at least as early as A.D. 600—or fourteen hundred years ago; by the fourteenth century, Chinese artists were decorating porcelain ware and other art objects with accurate and aesthetic renderings of the magnolia.

The Asian magnolias have the attribute of blooming in earliest spring on bare branches—before any leaves cover or compete with the blooms. Known to be among the most skillful of gardeners, the Chinese, and later the Japanese, learned how to graft, propagate, and force magnolias, selecting the aesthetically most desirable plants for temple and palace gardens. The Asian species introduced into cultivation were selected and improved over the centuries, while the plants remaining in the wild became increasingly scarce and limited in their range.

By contrast, the American magnolias were uncultivated trees surviving without human assistance in the wilderness. The flowers of some species, such as *Magnolia tripetala*, appear more disheveled and less elegantly formed than their more pampered and highly selected Asian relatives. And even more significantly, the American species bloom later—after the leaves have sprouted—and so the flowers are less conspicuous than those of the precocious Asian magnolias, which bloom on bare branches.

Europeans, lacking any native species of magnolia (all were wiped out by the last ice age), were delighted with their first magnolias, introduced from the New World (*Magnolia virginiana* in 1688, and later *Magnolia grandiflora*) but quickly lost interest in the American species after the first Asian magnolias were imported in the 1790s (*Magnolia liliiflora* and *Magnolia denudata*). Thirty years after these Asian introductions, a cavalry officer returning from the Napoleonic

wars conceived the idea of developing hybrids from them, trying to achieve the best qualities of each parent.

After Waterloo in 1815, Etienne Soulange-Bodin concluded that fighting wars was a worthless task, that both he and his opponents would have done better to have cultivated their own gardens rather than to have destroyed those of others. He vowed to devote his remaining energies to horticulture, and in the 1820s crossed two of the Asian magnolias, the white, tree-like *Magnolia denudata*, with the purple, shrubbier, later-flowering *Magnolia liliiflora*, to achieve an extravagantly beautiful hybrid, the *Magnolia ×soulangeana*, an immediate success and now one of the most popular magnolias planted in the United States. The great French botanical artist, Pierre-Joseph Redouté, speedily painted a single closed bloom for his *Choix des plus belles fleurs* (1827–1833).

### The Siting on Commonwealth Avenue

Before Commonwealth Avenue was first planned as a major city avenue in the 1850s, the land west of the Public Garden (from what is now Arlington Street to Massachusetts Avenue and beyond to Kenmore Square) was a mudflat, filled and drained by each salty ocean tide moving up the Charles River. In the 1820s the Boston and Roxbury Corporation attempted to supply power to various proposed commercial mills by constructing a dam across the Back Bay a mile and a half long, built along what is now Beacon Street and running parallel to the Charles River. But the Back Bay, when completely drained, produced unpleasant natural odors on the mudflats that were exacerbated by the odors from city sewerage also funneled into the area. Many of the proposed mills were built along the Merrimack rather than beside the Charles.

As complaints about health and sanitation grew—as well as the need for more residential property close to the city—the city fathers agreed, in a merger of state, city, and private

interests, to begin the task of filling in the Back Bay, a major engineering project of the period. Since no funds had been allotted for payments for the work, the wily fathers agreed to pay the construction engineers, Goss and Munson, with some of the valuable houselots they would produce with their fill. Utilizing the recently invented steam shovel and railroad, engineers excavated gravel from a site in nearby Needham and brought it nine miles by rail to the Back Bay. In the initial phase starting in 1859, land was filled on average at a rate of almost two large houselots a day; four thirty-five-car trains made twenty-five trips a day. Although filling went on through the late 1860s and 1870s, the final phase was not completed until 1882.

Planners had laid out the area in what was, compared to jumbled colonial Boston, an orderly geometric grid, with five streets to run parallel to the Charles River and smaller cross streets to bear names in alphabetical sequence (Arlington, Berkeley, Clarendon, Dartmouth, and so on). The centerpiece of the scheme, Commonwealth Avenue, was to be two hundred feet wide, with a center mall, or park, one hundred feet in width, for strolling, and each house was to be set back twenty feet from the sidewalk, allowing for small front yards.<sup>1</sup> Arthur Gilman, architect of the Arlington Street Church, is credited with the overall planning of the grid of the Back Bay, modeled on a smaller scale after the Parisian taste for grand boulevards; George Snell and landscape designers Copeland and Cleveland probably contributed to the plans for Commonwealth Avenue.

In the early years of Commonwealth Avenue, private townhouses were built at rather random intervals; historical photographs reveal clusters of brownstones separated at irregular intervals by vacant lots. In one photograph, taken around 1875, Commonwealth Avenue remains incomplete between Clarendon and Dartmouth streets: several lots toward Dartmouth and one in mid-block await houses. And the generally bleak



*Commonwealth Avenue between Exeter and Dartmouth streets during the 1880s. Photograph courtesy of the Bostonian Society.*

appearance of the street is primarily due to the absence of trees and shrubs. Over several decades all the vacant lots—through to Massachusetts Avenue—were slowly filled in—more attractively by private owners and less so by developers. During the 1880s, Frederick Law Olmsted laid plans for diverting and draining the Muddy River, a scheme that allowed the filling in of Commonwealth Avenue to continue toward Kenmore Square and Brookline Village. By the 1880s, Dartmouth and Exeter streets' empty lots were completely filled in by adjoining brownstones, each varied but sharing many common architectural details. Gradually, these private residences emerged as an American interpretation of French-inspired (Second

Empire) townhouses—but overall a relatively homogeneous architectural composition. To Walter Muir Whitehill's eye, "the Back Bay is still the handsomest and most consistent example of American architecture of the second half of the nineteenth century now existing in the United States."

Those Bostonians who first bought lots and built imposing five-story townhouses were from among the most distinguished of local families—and lived in a now-lost style of many servants, much leisure, and a close-knit social community. As more of the Back Bay was filled in, these citizens surrounded themselves with the monuments to their way of life: Symphony Hall, Horticultural Hall, the Museum of Fine Arts, Harvard Medical

School, the Museum of Natural History, and numerous churches, private clubs, and schools.

But beginning in the Depression, and certainly by the end of World War Two, the Back Bay had lost its fashionable cachet; most of the original families had sold the brownstones and moved out of the city—to properties with more land and fresh air. Many small colleges acquired the former private residences for dormitories and classrooms; the Back Bay streets were overrun with students. The now too large, elaborately paneled houses, already broken up into apartments, were further divided into rooms for transients. The once tidy Public Garden was no longer kept up but was marred by broken benches, trash, unkempt flower beds. It was during the 1960s, a low point in the life of the area, that public-spirited Bostonians pulled together to resuscitate the Back Bay with an array of new, private organizations whose purpose was to improve and beautify the city. Among them, on the front lines, serving on many of the boards as a volunteer, was Laura Dwight. The magnolias on Commonwealth Avenue were just one of her many projects—but one that remains a living memorial to her and one that will continue to bring refreshment and pleasure to Bostonians for many springs to come.

#### Endnote

<sup>1</sup> It was this small, front-yard space that allowed Laura Dwight's planting project to be successful. Peter Del Tredici of the Arnold Arboretum ascribes the survival of the magnolias to the fact that they were not planted

directly on the street but were enclosed in their protected fenced-in gardens. Magnolias, once they have been established for a year or two, are tough and hardy and require little care, not even pruning, except for the removing of dead branches—qualities that make them appealing to the busy city dweller, who often knows little about pruning.

#### Acknowledgments

Esther Heins began researching this article in 1981, when Frances Dwight was still living at 250 Beacon Street and Laura Dwight was in Sherrill House, a nursing home in Boston, after having suffered a severe stroke. She also spoke to Mrs. Charles Howard, whose late husband was president of the Neighborhood Association of the Back Bay when the street plantings took place.

I am most grateful to and would like to thank those who willingly spent time stirring their memories over events that occurred over twenty-five years ago: Irene Pitz, Mrs. R. A. Sawyer, Esther and Oliver Ames, Elizabeth Lay, Ann Twaddle, Sally Mead, Douglas Campbell, Liz Ann Chapin, Patsy Boyce Sidlowsky, Anne Jennings, Laura Dwight Lewis, Donald Dwight, Henry Flynt, Lyman Parsons, Daniel Needham, Polly Wakefield, and the Reverend Schuyler Jenkins.

I would be pleased to hear from anyone who recalls additional information about the plantings or about Laura Dwight.

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