THE DEVELOPING MAGNOLIA

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Seminar: Plants and People
[Assignment: The purpose of this assignment is to translate your observations of a tree into a short descriptive essay. Your essay must aim to persuade your audience, in this case the student body, to look more closely at the trees on our campus.]

(1) Heralding the arrival of springtime and new life, the bigleaf magnolia presents a dense canopy of white, fragrant flowers to the sky. Magnolias are among the earliest trees in seasonal development and maturation. From mid-March to mid-May, the magnolia undergoes a number of dramatic changes in rapid succession. At the beginning of March, the magnolia is easily recognized by the oval, pyramidal spread of bare branches. The bark is a medium-gray color, generally smooth, with few blemishes. Branches alternate, and knobby junctures appear where the branches fork. Magnolias have a characteristically "cluttered" look as the branches fork again and again in no orderly manner. Magnolias are generally from 10 to 15 feet in height.

(2) The middle of March, with warmer temperatures and larger amounts of precipitation, brings change to the magnolia. Existing twigs increase in length and become reddish-brown in color where the new growth has occurred. Light green buds appear on the outer tips of branches, their shape reminiscent of tear drops. The buds are covered in soft, silky down, and the form resembles that of a rosebud. The edges of the developing sepals can barely be detected. These buds are, at the most, only 2 cm in length and 1 cm in diameter.

(3) As the end of March draws near, buds dot the branches in greater numbers, appearing in profusion especially toward the center of the tree. The length and width of the buds have increased as well, though development seems slow. April brings even warmer temperatures and gentle rain, and with it the increasingly rapid development of the magnolia. The two outer sepals become more distinct and are a dark green color. This is called bud scale, and serves as a form of protection for the tender, developing bud inside, light green in color.

(4) The magnolia is hardy for a native Southern tree. This April brought a short stint of unusually cold weather, with temperatures ranging from 20 F. to 35 F. for an entire week. There was no visible damage to the magnolia at this point, although later development will show the results, if any.

(5) In mid-April, changes occur with startling frequency. Development of the bud structure continues, and the bud scales detach themselves from the buds. On

closer examination, the scales prove that they were indeed excellent protection, for they are fairly hard and rigid. As if shedding a suit of protective armor, the new underlying bud emerges strengthened and ready to face the elements.

(6) As the time for blooming of flowers approaches, buds increase in size to approximately 5 cms, and the inner light green bud scale parts to allow a glimpse of the creamy white petals. A few buds bloom and allow a view of the inside structure. Projections in the middle, the pollen producing anther and stamen, are fuzzy and green, with reddish-purple ends. A larger green projection occupies the center, and is covered with worm-like growths that lie close to it. The petals are rose-purple near the flower's base but grow lighter travelling outward to the tip, becoming creamy white. They are slightly textured, firm, and waxy to touch. As the magnolia develops further, more buds appear.

(7) The magnolia has the startling talent of exploding into bloom in the space of a few days. This allows for an excellent perusal of the bloom. The petals are approximately 14 cm wide in the middle of the petal and 10 cm long. They are arranged in two radially symmetrical layers, a triad on the outside and, in the space within the petals, a triad on the inside. Slight green "buds" appear near the flowers which are probably the beginnings of leaf formation. At this time the cluttered branches of the magnolia produce enough flowers to give the appearance of a lovely "sea of flowers."

(8) As April draws to a close, the magnolia sheds petals in great quantities, leaving only the bud structure and sepals intact. The hard green projection in the center grows slightly and the attached growths wither and turn black. The anther and stamen wither also, becoming a yellow-brown in color. This is the primary stage of seed formation. Leaves begin to develop on most areas of the tree and are small, 1 cm in length and 1/2 cm wide. Because leaf development occurs at the same time as seed formation, as each day passes the canopy of white becomes tinged with more and more green and less white until all that remains is a "sea of green," the leaves luxurious and smooth. This is quite lovely, almost as lovely as the former clothing of white, fragrant flowers.

(9) From no foliage to luxuriant blooms to rich green leaves, the magnolia is a beautiful tree, pleasing in shape and form, delightful to the eye, and pleasantly scented. It is truly a tree meant for anyone who enjoys beauty.