Lying completely within the tropics, Vietnam does not, to the uninitiated at least, conjure an image of temperate flora. However, in the north of this botanically rich country, mostly near the border with China, lie high mountains cool enough to support an extremely diverse array of temperate plants.

There has been a steady stream of new species described from Vietnam, with the conifer Xanthocyparis vietnamensis being one of the most notable. It therefore seemed likely that a new Magnolia would turn up at some stage, rich as the country is in members of that genus. Vietnam is home to around 60 Magnolia species, with some of those only very recently being found to occur within the

Nick Macer recounts how he discovered a recently described Magnolia in north Vietnam

Encounters with Magnolia sapaensis

One flower of Magnolia sapaensis was spotted in the wild but it flowers regularly in Cornwall

Tom Hudson
political boundaries, previously being known only as Chinese species.

Over the last two years, my companions and I have been exploring some of the mountains in the north. We have been in search of all things botanically interesting, and certainly with a keen eye open for Magnoliaceae.

In November 2009 while in the environs of Fan Si Pan mountain, near Sapa, Lao Cai province, I noticed a particularly handsome Magnolia growing on the northern slopes and on a nearby peak. In a zone from around 2,200m to 2,400m grew this small evergreen tree with oblong to oblong-elliptic leaves, usually strikingly white glaucous on the under surface, and with particularly attractive terminal buds. The bud scales were covered with adpressed rufous, silken hair and more often than not showed a slim greenish white band just behind the bud, while the rest of the shoot was green. The flowers were long gone, but conical fruits were in evidence, maturing red-pink, though mainly brown and shedding seed by the time we found them. On an evening descent from Fan Si Pan peak, in fading light, a single aberrant flower was seen. Still in bud, it was mainly white, but with obvious purple-pink markings on the outer tepals.

**Identifying the species**

On returning to the UK I set about trying to identify some of the plants we had not been able to put a name to in the field. For the Magnoliaceae I consulted Dick Figlar of South Carolina, one of the world’s leading experts on the family. While a mine of information on the other species we had seen, Figlar was stumped when it came to the plant described above, and for good reason. Emails were passed back and forth, but it was only when he quizzed a botanist at the South China Botanical Garden, Guangxi, China, that things became clear. We were looking at a new species.

This attractive small tree was, at that very time, in the process of being described by a Vietnamese botanist, Quang Nam Vu, working at the South China Botanical Garden. A few things did not quite match up, but it was very clear that Vu’s new species and my mystery tree was one and the same thing and I was able to provide further observations to aid its accurate
The foliage and ripe fruit of *Magnolia sapaensis* (above) and the inside of a flower (left)

description.

The name *Manglietia sapaensis* was published by Xia & Vu (2010). As most of the world now accepts the sinking of *Manglietia* and *Michelia* into *Magnolia*, summarized in Figlar (2006), it was clear this new species needed recombining. This was done by Grimshaw (2011), so it is now *Magnolia sapaensis* (N.H. Xia & Q.N. Vu) Grimshaw & Macer.

*Magnolia sapaensis* is closely related to *M. garrettii* from south China and north Vietnam. The former differs in being a smaller tree with shorter petioles, glaucous abaxial leaf surfaces and mainly white flowers, among other details.

**In cultivation**

While in conversation with Tom Hudson, owner of the inspirational...
The Tregrehan garden in Cornwall and many time traveller in Vietnam, I discovered that he had an unnamed Magnolia in his collection that seemed to fit the description of the species I had seen. It transpired that two trees of M. sapaensis have been flourishing at Tregrehan since being planted in 1999 and 2000, one being a cutting of the first. They currently stand approximately 8m tall in open woodland conditions and have been flowering for at least a couple of years, in June.

Its full hardiness in cultivation has hardly been tested as yet, with only the Tregrehan trees known in Western cultivation, but these have come through the recent cold winters without any damage at all, albeit in a sheltered Cornish woodland garden. Further trial is needed and it is hoped that plants will be tougher than some of the other Vietnamese species in cultivation, especially as M. sapaensis is found at a higher altitude than most Magnoliaceae in Vietnam. A recent introduction of seed will allow much wider planting.

A rich flora
In November 2010 I was back in north Vietnam, near Fan Si Pan and also in Ha Giang province. I saw Magnolia sapaensis again, along with M. catcartii, M. floribunda, M. foveolata (of both ‘aenea type’ and ‘fulgens type’, these two differing in leaf morphology and colour of hair on the leaf underside), M. grandis, M. insignis, and probably M. chapensis and M. conifera. This should give you an idea as to why Vietnam attracts plant explorers.

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