A tree or a shrub? Northern or southern? Full sun or partial shade? What is a tree’s favorite drink? Okay, maybe the last one is a little off topic.

When selecting a plant for a landscape, these questions must be answered to allow for ‘right plant, right place’. What happens when a single species’ description is all of the above? That doesn’t happen very often, but such is the case with *Magnolia virginiana*, or sweetbay magnolia.

*Magnolia virginiana* (sweetbay or swamp-laurel magnolia) is a diverse plant that is native from eastern Texas through the southeast to the east coast, and north to southern New York (Fig.1). The sweetbay magnolia’s native range allows for crocodiles slithering past the trunk near the swamps in southern Florida to surviving nor’easters, like the one in February of 2013 called Nemo, in its northern range! This fact alone suggests the diversity of this underutilized plant, with a lot of potential in our state.

Sweetbay magnolia is hardy to zone 5, which is a zone colder than most of Marion County, according to the updated USDA Plant Hardiness Zone. There is much variability in that the sweetbay may be deciduous, semi-evergreen, or evergreen. The sweetbay is a multi-stemmed shrub in the northern range with a height of 2’ to 20’, and a similar spread. In the southern range, sweetbay magnolia is a single-stemmed tree with a height of greater than 60’ that tends to be pyramidal shaped.

Traditionally, there has been very little research conducted on the differences in the northern vs. southern ecotypes of *Magnolia virginiana*. It is noted that *Magnolia virginiana* var. *australis* Sarg. is distinguished, in some circles, as the southern, or tree-like, form, differing from the northern type. There have been discussions, but little work performed, on whether var. *australis* it is a true variety, or a phenotypic plasticity (a change in the plant due to differing environmental conditions). Sweetbay magnolia is not commonly grown in nurseries due to the variability with producing, consistently, preferred forms (Fig.2). Research at Ohio State (Zale et.al., 2011) has been conducted examining the differences in the shrub versus tree forms in regards to nursery selections. The research has suggested that crossing two plants with desired traits (i.e. short, multi-stemmed or tall, single-stemmed plants) could produce, via sexual reproduction, desired outcomes.

As a landscape plant, sweetbay magnolia has the potential of being utilized in many situations. It has glossy leaves with a silver underside, nice form, and a subtle, but showy flower (Fig. 3). Most plants that are native to soils with poor drainage tend to be more urban tolerant, since urban soils are usually compacted, with poor drainage. Sweetbay magnolia, being native to poor soil drainage sites such as swampy/bog type areas, has this potential to being an urban tolerant option for difficult sites. This plant grows well at a young age in shade, but prefers moderate to full sun when mature, as research has indicated root length is reduced by 73% of mature plants grown in full shade versus partial shade (Little, 1950). Though this study demonstrates a reduction in root length in heavy shade, sweetbay magnolia can survive in shady areas. This plant prefers acidic soils, but can tolerate a wide range of pH conditions.

Sweetbay magnolia isn’t native to Indiana, but can perform well. There are two *Magnolia spp.* that are native to Indiana, *Magnolia acuminata* (cucumber magnolia) and
*Contact the author for citations*

**About the Author**
Kyle Daniel is the Nursery and Landscape Outreach Specialist in the Department of Horticulture and Landscape Architecture at Purdue University and the Education Director for the Indiana Nursery and Landscape Association. Kyle can be contacted via email at: daniel38@purdue.edu. Be sure to check out and ‘Like’ Purdue University Nursery and Landscape Extension at Facebook.com and visit their website at: https://ag.purdue.edu/hla/Extension/nle
Figure 1. Native range of *Magnolia virginiana* (Burns and Honkala, 1990)
Figure 2. *Magnolia virginiana* in field production
Figure 3. *Magnolia virginiana* flower. (Photo by Barbol http://flic.kr/p/9GvT5U)