

Greensand Country Heritage Trees

The Cucumber Tree, Moggerhanger Park

The tree in front of you is *Magnolia acuminata*, also known as the Cucumber Tree. This common name refers to the un-ripened fruit, which look more like gherkins. Magnolias are best known for being magnificent flowering trees, admired in spring and early summer. The flowers of the Cucumber Tree are sadly one of least spectacular, but it was the first magnolia to be discovered and grown in Britain, originally introduced from the eastern side of North America in 1736 and why this species was first named after its rather odd-looking fruit.



This species would have been known by the time Moggerhanger Park was being landscaped by Humphry Repton at the end of the 18th century, although this tree is believed to have been planted c.1850 while it was still in the ownership of the Thornton family, who lived at Moggerhanger from 1777-1857. By the end of the 19th century many more exotic magnolia species had been discovered and introduced from the Himalayas, China, and Japan. With their large pink and white flowers these new trees to cultivation meant the Cucumber Tree was no longer a curiosity and went out of fashion.

If you are viewing this in May or June, you may be fortunate to glimpse the flowers amongst the opening leaves. They are a greenish-yellow colour, opening from buds that have an almost metallic blue look about them but quite small compared to many magnolias we see planted today. Magnolias are an ancient species, and it



is believed that their flowers are constructed in such a way to attract beetles to pollinate them, originating from a time before other pollinating insects had evolved. The flower petals are described as bracts and the 220 or more species found in the world today have produced many different cultivated varieties. So readily do trees from the America's hybridise with those from the far East that experts suggest these populations were connected before the land mass split millions of years ago creating the continents we recognise today.

As the small cucumber-like fruits mature they turn from green to pink and then a deep red, becoming more contorted in shape as they develop. By autumn the tree is probably looking its most spectacular with its unusual display of oddly shaped knobbly red fruits!



Only three mature specimens have ever been recorded in Bedfordshire and this one is believed to be the oldest surviving tree. Nationally it is only seen occasionally in large gardens and for its size this tree is in the Top 20 biggest in Britain (2021).

The Heritage Tree post has been installed with kind permission of Moggerhanger Park Ltd.

