

Here at home, we're all familiar with the beauty of magnolia blossoms. The Mississippi Legislature officially adopted the magnolia tree as our state tree in 1938, and the blossom as the state flower in 1952.

We see the magnolia all over our state, and now we're going to be seeing it on the currency of our nation. Beginning October 22, millions of Americans will be carrying, spending, collecting and admiring the Mississippi state quarter.

That's the day we finally launch the beautiful coin that honors Mississippi as "The Magnolia State." The Director of the U. S. Mint, Henrietta Holsman Fore, will be in Jackson to help us celebrate this great event at the Natural Science Museum.

We are the 20th state to be represented on the quarter through a program coordinated by the U. S. Mint. Started in 1999, the program is scheduled to produce a quarter for each state over the course of ten years.

States are honored in the order in which they joined the Union or ratified the U. S. Constitution, and coins are produced for only five states each year. Mississippi is the last state to have a coin minted in 2002.

The Mint will produce the Mississippi quarter for ten weeks. Once that time is up, the quarter will never be produced again. This limited production phase has created a great demand for state quarters, with an estimated 139 million Americans collecting them.

The production of state quarters has an educational aspect as well. According to the Mint, three out of five Americans believe the quarters are helpful in learning about the states and their history, geography and culture.

Our children will benefit from the learning opportunities associated with the Mississippi quarter, using it as a starting point to read and study more about the historical and cultural aspects of the state.

Lesson plans are also available for use in classrooms from kindergarten through sixth grade. Teachers can download the plans at the Mint's website, www.usmint.gov/kids. I would encourage teachers across Mississippi to take advantage of this resource.

The website also offers collectors opportunities to purchase the coins, minted in Philadelphia or Denver, in rolled sets or in bags of 100 coins. In fact, the coins are available for purchase before the official launch of the quarter into circulation.

The double magnolia design of our state quarter has received great praise for its beauty.

Across the nation and around the world, people recognize Mississippi as the magnolia state. With the release of the quarter, we have another means of relating the beauty of our state.

And, with the completion of the state quarters program in 2008, coins from every state will be displayed at the Smithsonian.

We should be proud of this coin and the message it sends about our great state.