

Flower Power

Spring at Stephen F. Austin State University in Nacogdoches

or

March Gladness

Spring at Stephen F. Austin State University in Nacogdoches

Story and Photographs by Randy Mallory

Mention Stephen F. Austin State University in Nacogdoches, and I think of towering pine trees. The East Texas school was, after all, carved out of a loblolly forest in the 1920s, and the college mascot is a lumberjack.

Pines still cover campus in a canopy of green. But last spring, my mind turned to the other side of the color chart, to a riot of reds, pinks, and purples I experienced in the university's Ruby M. Mize Azalea Garden.

The eight-acre azalea garden, the state's largest, is the springtime star of three gardens on or near campus. La Nana Creek flows between the azalea garden and the SFA Mast Arboretum, an 11-acre themed horticultural garden. A few blocks north is the Pineywoods Native Plant Center, 40 acres of forest habitat. All three form a living laboratory for students, visitors, and the nursery and landscaping industry.

The azalea garden is also the heart of the annual Nacogdoches Azalea Trail (March 15-29, 2008), which features a 20-mile driving route flush with spring color.

The azalea garden's mile or so of paved walkway meanders beneath pines, pecans, and Southern sugar maples...the perfect verdant backdrop for a dizzying display of Mother Nature's eye candy.

Masses of magenta and mauve. Oodles of orange and apricot. Scads of scarlet and crimson. Snow white azaleas contrast with loads of lavender and lilac—the school’s colors are purple and white! Collectively, the azaleas seem to set the woods on fire with color.

Dedicated in 2000, the garden is named to honor Ruby M. Mize, one of the first local azalea gardeners. It now boasts 6,000 azalea shrubs (genus *Rhododendron*) laid out in 46 numbered beds. The vast majority are evergreens (subgenus *Tsutsusi*), native primarily to Japan. Many have been hybridized or cross-bred to enhance features such as color, size, shape, and hardiness. The garden also grows more than 230 deciduous azalea plants (subgenus *Pentanthera*), also called “natives,” because they’re native to North America.

The azalea has long been a Southern garden favorite. The SFA azalea garden plays a vital role in evaluating which ones thrive in Nacogdoches’ climate zone 8b—characterized by acidic soil (pH 5.8-6.5), hot and humid summers, and 40-plus inches of rain annually. Staff acquire plant cuttings and seeds from various sources in the U.S. and abroad, grow them in SFA greenhouses, then evaluate their performance in the garden.

As a result, the azalea garden acts as a genetic bank for azaleas, says Buddy Lee, a noted hybridizer from Independence, Louisiana, and past president of the Azalea Society of America. “Demand for azalea color is up, so plant professionals look to Nacogdoches to help decide which ones will do best.”

Buddy was the first to hybridize the patented Encore azalea, known for multi-seasonal blooming. I happened upon some of his handiwork in the garden’s Bed 28. “Autumn Sunset” (Azalea x 'Roblen' PP#16248) is the same Encore azalea I recently planted in my backyard. The evergreen hybrid promises orange-red blossoms spring, summer, and fall.

A native hybrid called “Aromi Sunrise” (*Rhododendron* x ‘*Aromi Sunrise*’) waved to me from a sunny spot at the base of a pine. Its clustered tangerine blooms swayed in the wind like tiny cheerleaders’ pom-poms. I recognized another showy native, the Piedmont or Hoary Azalea (*Rhododendron canescens*). I had seen its long tubular pink flowers at Wild Azalea Canyon in Newton County.

One sprawling shrub made me wonder if it was actually an azalea. The purple “Spider Azalea” (*Rhododendron* ‘*Koromo-shikibu*’) sported long, narrow lavender petals with dark purple speckles. It reminded me of lilies I’d seen along East Texas roadsides.

Azaleas headline the garden’s spring floral show. But a supporting cast of other bloomers keeps color alive year-round, says azalea garden coordinator Barbara Stump.

From May to August, some 240 hydrangeas display large showy blue, pink, and red blooms. October to February, 300-plus camellias glow with white, coral-pink and purple-red flowers, sometimes streaked red and white. Spring through fall, the leaves of 200 Japanese maples take center stage in shades of yellow, gold, ruby red, and sunset orange. “Some maples undergo a series of color changes,” Barbara adds, “such as *Acer palmatum* ‘*Tsuma kaki*’ which has soft yellow-green leaves with persimmon-red tips in the spring, deep green in the summer, then crimson red in the fall.”

Color’s not everything at the gardens of SFA. Learning about plant diversity is.

In 1985 long-time horticulture professor Dr. Dave Creech and his students planted a half-acre shrub and color garden beside the Agriculture Building as a landscaping class project.

Steady expansion, boosted by a couple of major endowments, has grown the SFA Mast Arboretum to 11 acres of plants grouped in 20 theme gardens. Its collection—some 7,500 plants strong—includes native trees and creeping vines, exotic tropicals and ornamental grasses, plus conifers and cacti. Named for local supporters Adlai and Patricia Mast Jr., the

arboretum also hosts ongoing tours and educational programs, plus an annual spring sale of plants grown by SFA students and volunteers.

The arboretum, like the azalea garden, is not a meticulously planned place. “We’d rather plant than plan,” says Dave Creech, now fulltime arboretum director. Rather than a design garden, it’s more of a botanical encyclopedia, where 500 new varieties are evaluated in the ground each year. “We have one of the most diverse gardens in the state,” Dave explains. “We test which plants are Texas-tough and which are not.”

White and yellow Lady Banks Roses cascaded down a cedar arbor in the arboretum’s Texas Heritage Garden, where plants date from the Texas independence period.

For a wilder look at native Texas flora, I ventured north on the La Nana Creek Trail, which runs three miles from downtown to the Pineywoods Native Plant Center. Enroute, I passed the SFA Children’s Garden, which sports a timber-frame pavilion, small water garden, and 75 kinds of butterfly-friendly perennials and woody plants.

The La Nana Creek Trail junctions the native plant center’s two miles of trail. The center occupies 40 acres that once belonged to Stephen W. Blount, signer of the Texas Declaration of Independence. Bald cypress, palmetto, and cattails in a wetland section made me think I was in the Big Thicket instead of a bustling college town. In a drier, upland area, I encountered white dogwood blossoms, red buckeye, and prickly pear cactus—as well as locals out for an after-work walk.

The trail winds past the restored 1930s home of Edward and Mamie Blount Tucker. The mansion’s flowerbeds serve as a satellite demonstration garden for the Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center in Austin. The garden grows 100 native East Texas species, including the endangered Texas Trailing Phlox.

Rescuing, researching, and reintroducing endangered and threatened Pinewoods species remains a key goal of the native plant center, which opened in 2000.

Heading back to the azalea garden, I thought about the diversity of plant life I'd seen at SFA's gardens. Here, the magical bond between people and plants seemed alive and well—both for professionals studying the latest hybrids and for green-thumb wannabes, like me, simply out for a blast of color on a warm spring day.

--30--

essentials **GARDENS OF SFA**

The Ruby M. Mize Azalea Garden and the SFA Mast Arboretum are on the east side of the campus of Stephen F. Austin State University in Nacogdoches in a 19-acre area bounded by College, University, Starr, and Wilson streets. Free parking for the azalea garden is on the south side of SFA's Johnson Coliseum (College at University Dr.). South of the parking lot is the garden entrance where you can pick up a garden guide. Hours: dawn to dusk daily. Entrance: free. Arboretum guides are available in the SFA Agriculture Building on Wilson Dr. The Pinewoods Native Plant Center is at 2900 Raguet St., with guides available along the trail.

The Nacogdoches Azalea Trail (Mar. 15-29) features a 20-mile driving trail through residential neighborhoods and the SFA Mize Azalea Garden. Events include an azalea plant sale (Mar. 15) on the downtown square, Main (TX 21) at Pecan streets. For details and a driving guide, call the Nacogdoches Convention & Visitors Bureau, 936/564-7351 or 888/653-3788 (www.visitnacogdoches.org). Also contact the CVB for tours of SFA gardens.

Other spring events include monthly lectures on plant selection and breeding (Mar. 20, Apr. 17, and May 15) and the annual Easter egg hunt at the Pinewoods Native Plant Center (Mar. 22). On Apr. 12, the annual Garden Gala Day Plant Sale offers many varieties of Texas-

tough plants raised by SFA students and volunteers. May 28-Jun. 1 is the annual Lone Star Regional Native Plant Conference, featuring top speakers and field trips.

For more information on SFA's gardens and events call 936/468-1832

(<http://arboretum.sfasu.edu>). [NOTE: THIS URL WILL NOT WORK USING WWW]

For valuable information on azaleas and growing techniques, check the Azalea Society of America website (www.azaleas.org).

RESOURCES:

NOTE: THE FIRST TWO NAMES ARE BEST TO REVIEW TEXT ACCURACY

--Dave Creech, Arboretum Dir, dcreech@sfasu.edu

--Barbara Stump, Arboretum (esp. azaleas), bstump@sfasu.edu

--Greg Grant, Native Plant Center

--Elyse Rodewald, Arboretum Ed/Events, erodewald@sfasu.edu

--Melissa Sanford, Azalea Trail/events, Nacog CofC

-- <http://arboretum.sfasu.edu/arboretumhistory.html> (arboretum history)

--Buddy Lee, azalea hybridizer

--Azalea botanical details:

--SFA site: <http://azalea.sfasu.edu/>

--Azalea Soc. of Am. Website for botanical details: www.azaleas.org

--re: Azalea City designation: <http://www.azaleas.org/index.pl/azaleacity.html>

--RE: Tucker House:

<http://www.fri.sfasu.edu/pages/about/html/tuckerhistory.html>