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## **Mother Nature's Eye Candy**

Spring at the SFA Mast Arboretum in Nacogdoches

or

## **March Gladness**

Spring at the SFA Mast Arboretum in Nacogdoches

### **Story and Photographs by Randy Mallory**

Mention Stephen F. Austin State University in Nacogdoches, and I think of towering pine trees. No wonder. The East Texas school was carved out of a loblolly pine forest in the 1920s, and the college mascot is a lumberjack.

Tall pines cover the campus in a canopy of green. But last spring, my mind shifted to the other side of the color chart as I strolled the university's azalea garden (the state's largest) and the springtime star of the 40-acre SFA Mast Arboretum. Two meandering miles of walkways led me along La Nana Creek past a dizzying display of Mother Nature's eye candy.

A riot of reds, pinks, and purples permeate the 10-acre Ruby M. Mize Azalea Garden. Masses of magenta and mauve. Oodles of orange and apricot. Scads of scarlet and crimson. Lots of lavender and lilac interlaced with white azaleas—the school colors are purple and white, after all!

The single-colored red azalea XXX made me think I was in my own front yard, where I planted that hybridized cultivar (short for cultivated variety) a couple of decades ago.

Bi-colored azaleas, such as the color-color XXX, and striped azaleas, such as the pink-and-white Azalea Satsuki "Gorin Nishiki") tickled my fancy.  
and flecks.

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blotched a darker or lighter different color on the top petal, often extending to the upper wing petals

striped thin to wide stripes of a different color, extending from the base to the margin of any of the petals. Discontinuous stripes are usually called dots, flecks or sanding.

margined thin or wide margins of a different color, on all of the petals

sectored all or part of one or more petals of a different color

Some azaleas, particularly the Satsuki azaleas, may exhibit all of these variations on the same plant. Individual blossoms of the Pinto, for example, may be red or white or half and half.

Some made me wonder if I was seeing azaleas at all.

lavender azalea is the purple spider azalea,

Rhododendron 'Koromo Shikibu.....

scarlet red **Huang**

1-6-31 caused

quite a stir on

every tour, as

it was totally

covered with

little hose-

within-hose

flowers

**SFA's azalea garden was created after local university supporters—Patricia and the late Adlai Mast, for whom the arboretum was named—who wanted to beautify the campus' eastern entrance. Dedicated in 2000 and named for one of the city's first azalea growers, the Ruby M. Mize Azalea Garden now boasts some 7,500 azalea bushes**

representing **525 hybrid and XXX native species**. Carefully arranged in 46 flower beds, azaleas bloom here from late February through **first freeze in November**. Other plants keep color in the garden year-round. Hydrangeas bloom May to August, camellias October to February, and the vibrant leaves of Japanese maples show their stuff XXX to XXX.

In spring azaleas are the star attraction in the SFA Mast Arboretum. It's also the heart of the annual Nacogdoches Azalea Trail (March 15-29, 2008), which features a 20-mile driving route through residential neighborhoods aglow with springtime color.

The other 30 acres of the SFA Mast Arboretum....

Year-round the arboretum as a whole serves as a living laboratory for students, plant professionals, and visitors to learn what grows well in this environmental setting (acidic soil of pH 5.8-6.5 and growing zone 8b).

### **GARDEN SCOPE/BASICS/YEAR-ROUND COLOR**

Some 20 years in the making, the SFA Mast Arboretum and its prized azalea garden have become stalwarts in the horticultural industry.

Buddy quote...other nursery quote?

Adds arboretum director Dr. Dave Creech, “

Look closely, and you'll see that an azalea is not an azalea is not an azalea.

Azaleas—like their kissin' cousins, the rhododendrons, also found in the garden—are members of the genus *Rhododendron*. Most are hybrids from the evergreen species (subgenus *Tsutsusi*), originally from Asia. Others are deciduous (subgenus *Pentanthera*), native to North America and grow naturally in the wild from seeds. The garden has nice examples of the fragrant pink native azalea found wild in Texas, the Piedmont or Hoary azalea (*Rhododendron*

*canescens*). Still others are hybrid natives, that combine the best features of cultivated and wild azaleas.

joined at the base

10 to 12 petals, due to the calyx becoming petals ('Satin Robe')

typically 5 **petals** 30 or more petals ('Balsaminiflorum').

Flower **sizes** range from 1/4" to as much as 5"

different **petal** shapes, ranging from narrow petals ('Linearifolium', 'Koromo Shikibu') through triangular petals ('Satin Robe') to overlapping rounded petals ('Kobai'). Petal edges may be flat, recurved, wavy or ruffled.

Many varieties are dense and compact, others are quite open, and some are almost tree-like.

Blooms show in waves that last typically from late February through first frost in Nov????? This year our **bloom sequence in the Ruby M. Mize**

**Azalea Garden really showed why it is a good idea to**

**plant many different cultivars from many different**

**hybrid groups, Barbara**

### **TIMELINESS**

Sheer beauty is only part of the garden's purpose....

and developed through a controlled breeding process

Azalea Collections

54 evergreen hybrid groups in the Color Display Beds, and 61 fragrant deciduous species

hybrids

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The evergreen Girard, Glenn Dale, Kurume, Back Acres, Robin Hill and Southern Indian azalea hybrids fill most of the color beds (Beds 1-24; 34-39). The Chinese Huang and Gartrell's numbered hybrids are found in Beds 9, 31-32. Most May-blooming Satsuki are found in Beds 4, 17, 32-33. Beds 29-33 trial small evaluation sets of cutting-edge hybrids. Repeat-blooming Encore™ azaleas are found in Beds 13 and 42.

-- showcases collections of other new plants being introduced by growers in Texas and across the South. This makes this a prime location for display gardens of plants that thrive in acid soils

But the azalea garden's other plant beds color hardly ever fades from the garden

The azalea garden is star attraction of the SFA Mast Arboretum, the state's first university arboretum.

This is an eight-acre public garden, built between 1997 and 2001 as a project of Stephen F. Austin State University and the SFA Mast Arboretum. As a result, in 2004 the Azalea Society of America recognized Nacogdoches as its first official "Azalea City," a designation of top towns that display and promote azaleas.

### Camellia Collection

Visit the Camellia Forest Loop to see over 200 cultivars, from the fall-blooming Camellia sasanqua to the winter-blooming C. japonica, as well as rare species from Southeast Asia.

### Japanese Maples

Mid-story in height and intensely varied and delicate of foliage, Japanese maples, *Acer palmatum*, and the Full-Moon Maple, *A. japonicum*, add spring and fall foliage color and interest in every bed in the garden.

## Special Collections

Many unique ornamental woody species add diversity to this garden.

30 cultivars of the Japanese Plum Yew, *Cephalotaxus*—the only evergreen yew we can grow reliably in climate Zone 8b—are in Bed 23.

The Chinese Witch-Hazel, *Loropetalum*, makes a colorful and hardy purple and white evaluation hedge in Bed 5.

Beds 24 and 35 display over 40 specimens of Box, *Buxus sempervirens*.

Over 180 Hydrangea cultivars are planted along the eastern edges of Beds 2, 3, 4, 18 and 19 as well as pink selections in Beds 40-42. Cultivars include the typical Garden Hydrangea, *H.*

*macrophylla*, and Lacecap, *H. paniculata*, to the native Oak-Leaf Hydrangea, *H. quercifolia*, and some very exotic specimens from Southeast Asia and Japan such as *H. aspera* and *H. serrata*.

Our truly unique ornamental trees range from *Styrax japonica* 'Rubrum Pendula', a pink Japanese Snowbell, the American Smoke Tree, *Cotinus obovatus*, and Dusty Zenobia, *Z. pulverulenta*.

The yellow *Magnolia* 'Elizabeth', other deciduous magnolias, the Chinese Fringe Tree, *Chionanthus retusus*, and *Michelia maudiae*, a tall Chinese banana shrub that began blooming in February this year, give light-flowered contrast throughout the garden.

200 Camellias, including 21 bred and selected by 1930s SFASU Agriculture graduate, Hody Wilson

200 varieties of Japanese maples

180 varieties of Hydrangea

400 rare ornamental trees and shrubs

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Today, the garden contains over 8,600 plants representing over 300 taxa, or unique genus and species combinations.

### Plant Collections

The garden contains 46 beds, connected by over one mile of trails. Primary plant collections consist of species and cultivars of Azaleas (*Rhododendron* sp.), Camellias, and Japanese Maples, with many other rare and unique ornamental woody specimens. A key objective is to present color throughout the year, especially by selecting repeat-blooming azalea cultivars that bloom in the summer and fall.

Favorite hangout for families taking Easter snapshots.

The garden remains colorful during the rest of the year, as well. In summer...., hydrangeas In autumn...Japanese maples, 216 varieties of Japanese maples—the South's largest collection. In winter the camellias

The garden design was a joint effort of Dr. David Creech and faculty members of SFA Horticulture and Barbara Stump, Azalea Garden Project Coordinator  
"theme" gardens

Plants were selected that could adapt to Nacogdoches' acidic soil (pH 5.8-6.5) and USDA Zone 8b and American Horticulture Society Heat Zone 9 climate conditions—over 46 inches of rain annually, seasonal flooding, and a 240-day hot and humid summer growing season.

Flower color and cultivar novelty were secondary criteria.

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The focal point of the garden is the Council Ring, designed as a meeting place from which to view the whole garden.

The garden design was a joint effort of Dr. David Creech and faculty members of SFA Horticulture and Barbara Stump (M.S. Agriculture, SFA, 2001).

It is also an example of public/private cooperation to develop a garden for future generations.

Private donors, the City of Nacogdoches, area nurserymen, volunteers, and the Azalea Society of America also joined in the effort to make the garden you see today.

### **QUOTE FROM BARBARA...CREECH?**

### **OTHER ASPECTS OF MAST....NAME**

Now the SFA Mast Arboretum is a 20-acre garden where leaf-loving students and visitors rub elbows with landscaping and nursery notables—all of whom

, the to study and enjoy 525 named plant varieties or cultivars—from native trees to creeping vines, exotic tropicals to ornamental grasses, tried-and-true perennials to experimental hybrids—the arboretum is a Mecca for green thumb wannabes, like me, to learn what thrives in the acidic soils of the Pineywoods.

.... sandy loam soil of the LaNana Creek floodplain

*shrub and color garden, 2) a Texas Heritage Garden that features plant favorites of east Texas gardeners in the nineteenth century, 3) a daylily garden that includes an "almost-complete" collection of the Stout Medal Series, the best of the best as voted on by the American Hemerocallis Society, 4) an herb garden that features a "gray and green" garden and a fragrant path, a garden supported the Herb Society of Deep East Texas, 5) a Rock Garden, the "Elking Environment," is home to about 60 different herbaceous perennials, most from drier climes further west, 6) an Iris garden that displays Iris species and cultivars, both dry and wet-loving types, 7) a woodland glen - the shade garden - is home to a collection of*



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*southern native and exotic ferns, hostas, and many other shade-loving species, 8) a "bog" flourishing with wetland plant treasures, several that are endangered or threatened in the native habitat, 9) a perennial border, home to many herbaceous garden plants that show promise for Texas gardens, 10) a section dedicated to outstanding southern native plants, 11) an "Asian valley" that features over 50 varieties of Japanese maple, over 200 varieties and 10 groups of Rhododendrons and azaleas, and many woodland companion plants, 12) a dry garden that displays many new plants in the landscape from western U.S. and Mexico and is based on minimum input gardening, dry and heat-loving plants, 13) a conifer and holly garden displays many rare and potentially outstanding landscape plants, 14) a "vegetable garden" is the work of students in various Horticulture and Agronomy classes, and 15) a "lines of vines" collection has been established at the north end of the arboretum as a part of the vegetable garden: an assembly of sun-loving, showy, woody climbers, each established on their own display posts. Gardens in the works: Development of a "Children's Garden" - that includes an outdoor education pavilion erected by the Timber Framers Guild in March 1998, the SFA Azalea Garden*

"Asian Valley" theme garden planted in bottomland. Plants of the Orient. 52 Japanese maples, 210 different azaleas, rare trees and shrubs. Island bed approach developed???...where mize is now?

Dry Garden created as foundation planting of south face of Art building. Yuccas, Dasylirions, Hesperaloes, Agaves, cacti . . . desert willows, mexican redbuds, buckeyes as small trees. Raised bed/RR tie frame - 4 inches of sandy loam for elevation - limestone - bark mulch.

two bridges, five benches,

Bog Garden is created in a natural wet area of the bottomland ...mize now?

Vegetable garden

conifer and holly garden

City connected the arboretum with the LaNana Creek Trail, a creek-side walking, jogging and biking trail that runs from downtown some XX miles to beyond the native plant center?>>

Generated public interest through Arboretum Garden Gala Day and plant sales...still held twice a year.

Magnolias-on-the-slope

Lines of vines woody vines on 10' tall 4" X 4" posts.

Many of the species on display have never been tested in Texas. Rare trees, shrubs, vines, ground covers and herbaceous perennials abound.

Plants have been obtained through exchanges, gifts and purchases.....with the North Carolina State University Arboretum, Arnold Arboretum, the National Arboretum, specialty nurseries, plant enthusiasts and plant-hunting/plant collecting expeditions in the South and Mexico.

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**HIST**....In 1985 a Landscape Plant Materials class planted a half-acre shrub and color garden next to the Agriculture Building. Gradual support of community, industry....

1996: An endowment by local nature-lovers??? Patricia and the late Adlai Mast secured the arboretum's future as a living laboratory for students, visitors, and the landscaping industry.

## **NATIVE PLANT CENTER**

Hike from azalea garden along La Nana Creek trail to the arboretum's sister project, the Pineywoods Native Plant Center. ....trail runs three miles from downtown to the center.

A few blocks away, the arboretum jointly operates (with the Forest Resources Institute) the 40-acre Pineywoods Native Plant Center. The center conserves diverse ecosystems—dry upland, mesic mid-slope and riparian bottomland—that include some 50 Pineywoods species considered in decline.

Walk trail back to azalea garden...

....I noticed the orange-red Encore azalea “Autumn Sunset.” which I recently planted in my shaded backyard. This patented azalea promises a color show spring, summer, and fall. I look forward to seeing this Technicolor blast for months to come.

--30--

#### essentials **SFA MAST ARBORETUM**

The SFA Mast Arboretum is located on the east side of the campus of Stephen F. Austin State University in Nacogdoches. Arboretum gardens are bounded by College, University, Starr, and Wilson streets. Free parking for the Mize Azalea Garden is on the south of SFA's Johnson Coliseum, located at College and University Dr. Hours: dawn to dusk daily. Entrance: free. The Pineywoods Native Plant Center is at 2900 Raguet St.

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) is 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](http://www.visitnacogdoches.org)). 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 Pineywoods 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-

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Jun. 1 is the annual Lone Star Regional Native Plant Conference, featuring top speakers and field trips. For details on the arboretum and events call 936/468-1832

(<http://arboretum.sfasu.edu>). [NOTE: THIS WEBSITE WILL NOT WORK USING WWW] The Azalea Society of America also offers valuable information on azaleas and growing techniques.

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### RESOURCES

- Dave Creech, Arboretum Dir, [dcreech@sfasu.edu](mailto:dcreech@sfasu.edu)
- Barbara Stump, Arboretum (esp. azaleas), [bstump@sfasu.edu](mailto:bstump@sfasu.edu)
- Greg Grant, Native Plant Center
- Elyse Rodewald, Arboretum Ed/Events, [erodewald@sfasu.edu](mailto: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](http://www.azaleas.org)
- re: Azalea City designation: <http://www.azaleas.org/index.pl/azaleacity.html>