

Homes & Gardens

Historic neighborhoods remain traditional Tyler's stock and trade.

Text and photographs by Randy Mallory

From where I sit in the Azalea District, a solid sense of tradition permeates the neighborhood.

Old oaks lord over homes of diverse styles and sizes. The houses—mostly built in the early 20th century—line red-brick streets like architectural books on a shelf: an elegant brick Victorian mansion here, a humble wood-frame Craftsman house there.

Almost every home has a front porch for congregating. Almost every block has sidewalks for walking. The venerable neighborhood embodies an old-fashioned ambiance which trendy “New Urbanism” neighborhoods emulate.

This time of year, I revel in autumn's metamorphosis. Oaks cloak themselves in shades of gold and bronze. Sweet gums turn reddish-purple. A looming bald cypress drops a blanket of rust-colored needles across my yard on First Street.

A couple of blocks away on Chilton Street, a decades-old Japanese ginkgo tree shimmers with a yellowish glow that aspens would envy. Home owner Billy Barham is glad for passers-by to pose for photos beside his beloved ginkgo. But be quick about it, he says. After an early freeze one year, the slow-growing, 30-foot tree shed its golden locks all in a single day.

Most who live in Tyler's historic neighborhoods love sharing their surroundings. So much so, that locals regularly fling open front doors and garden gates for historic homes and gardens tours.

The largest garden, the 14-acre Tyler Municipal Rose Garden, was established in 1952 and welcomes visitors year-round. It takes center stage each October when eye-popping rose petals—35,000 bushes and 600 varieties worth—look their best during the annual Texas Rose

Festival (October 14-17). Since 1933 the festival's elaborate parade, rose queen's tea and coronation, plus rose show, have paid homage to a rose-growing heritage born of disaster.

A century ago, droughts, freezes and disease devastated the area's peach orchards, and farmers turned to roses. By the 1950s, some 200 growers raised half the nation's roses. Only a handful of growers remain, but local processors still ship much of America's rose crop, grown mostly in Arizona and California. The Tyler Rose Museum, located at the Rose Garden, retells the colorful story of the rose industry and the festival that honors it.

My family has visited the Rose Garden for decades, strolled its Technicolor rows of neatly-labeled bushes and paused at its fountains and reflecting pool. So I was delighted when I recently discovered a horticultural gem tucked in a back corner of the garden.

"I call it the garden beyond the roses," Sue Adee tells me at the IDEA Garden. She's one of the Smith County Master Gardeners who nurture 650 plant varieties (and hold seminars) in this small but intensive garden. I pause at trellised red trumpet vines above lilac-colored blossoms of the Mexican Bush Sage. "There's color in the garden just about all year," Adee says. "We want to show the wide range of plants that can succeed in home gardens."

In the last few years Tyler spiffed up its rose reputation by adding Earth-Kind roses to street medians and parks. These roses are among landscaping plants tested and recommended by the Texas AgriLife Extension Service as "Earth-Kind," meaning they're eco-friendly and "no-brainer" easy to grow.

Last year the city also opened the Chamblee Rose Garden as the anchor of an all Earth-Kind botanical garden on the nine-acre grounds of the 1859 Goodman-LeGrand House and Museum. Forest-green iron fences and native red-rock pillars surround the garden's 120 rose bushes. Long-time rose grower Mark Chamblee donated the bushes to honor his grandfather,

Walter Kelly, who worked as groundskeeper at the property which Sallie Goodman LeGrand donated to the city upon her death in 1939.

Goodman family heirlooms fill the restored Classical Revival mansion (open for tours and special events) which stands as the northern gateway to historic downtown.

Downtown's courthouse square sports several slick new venues—such as the Main Street Gallery (juried shows of area artists) and the Downtown Coffee Lounge (aromatic drinks and fresh baked goods)—housed in historic structures.

The best view of the historic square perches atop the new al fresco rooftop lounge at Jakes Tyler. This upscale eatery (steaks and seafood) fills three levels of a former men's clothing store built in 1904. From here, the sun sets behind the architecturally and historically significant Peoples National Bank (now Tyler Towne Centre). Noted Houston architect Alfred C. Finn drew up plans for the 15-story Art Deco structure. When built in the 1930s, it stood as one of Texas' tallest buildings. The Great Depression gripped most of the nation at the time, but not Tyler. The East Texas Oil Field had just blown in, and oilmen busily opened offices in the Peoples Bank tower and constructed homes in then-new neighborhoods.

The homes still recall those boom days along 100 blocks of the city's three largest National Register-listed historic neighborhoods—the Azalea, Brick Streets and Charnwood districts.

Almost every day we're in town, my wife, Sallie, and I walk or bike through these side-by-side neighborhoods. We stop at Brady's Coffee for a medium-roast brew and chit-chat with the regulars. Or we drop by Bruno's for hand-tossed, cheese-laden pizza and antipasto salad that's a meal in itself.

The Azalea District's Bergfeld Park, just two blocks from our home, is always on our route. Families flock to its playground, picnic tables and tennis courts. Throughout the year, the

eight-acre park hosts charity runs and walks, as well as arts and crafts fairs and countless birthday parties. Concerts and outdoor movies take place in the amphitheater, which Gen. R.E. Woods, president of Sears, Roebuck & Company, donated during the Depression in gratitude for rare profits turned by the local Sears store.

Thousands of out-of-towners experience Tyler's historic neighborhoods during the annual Azalea & Spring Flower Trail (March 18 through April 3, 2011). Two well-marked driving routes wind along 10 scenic miles past homes and gardens gussied up in spring color.

A must-see stopover lies at the corner of Dobbs Street and College Avenue. That's where three contiguous houses—owned by the Davis, Pyron and McGuire families—let visitors meander through their lush, manicured gardens. Banks of pink, red and white azaleas line rock walkways and footbridges. White and pink dogwood blossoms seem to fly in dappled shade under tall pines and oaks.

Azalea Trail visitors get a look *inside* a handful of well-gardened historic homes during the annual Spring Homes Tour. The preservation group, Historic Tyler, selects different homeowners each year to open up their homes and gardens. "People in the historic neighborhoods devote so much effort to their properties," says Historic Tyler executive director Janie Menegay, "they really want people to see the architecture and learn the history."

The 1878 McClendon House exudes refined architecture and history. One family—descendants of Texas State Supreme Court justice, M. H. Bonner, who first bought the land—lived in the Eastlake Bracketed house for more than a century. Original mantles, light fixtures and furniture bought in New York City exude Victorian style. The McClendon House was a such a cultured gathering place when built that Texas Governor R. B. Hubbard described it as "like living on Fifth Avenue." White House correspondent, Sarah McClendon—famous for her press conference grilling of presidents—was born in the house.

Each Saturday evening in October, the McClendon House offers guided Spirit Tours. (It's also open during the Azalea Trail, for special events and by appointment.) This not-so-spooky annual affair features local actors portraying Sarah and other influential McClendon family members.

More home gardens go on display each May, when the Smith County Master Gardeners hold an annual Home Garden Tour, featuring a half-dozen or so area gardens.

My favorite stop last year was the funky hideaway of Jim and Ann Powell. Footpaths ramble past 90-plus varieties of trees, shrubs, vines and ground covers, plus colorful annual and perennial plants. Interspersed throughout are eclectic recycled items, what the Powells call "artistic junk." A rusty wheelbarrow overflows with red and pink begonias. Yard rakes stand on end, their metal tines painted blue, red and yellow like so many blooms. A cluster of decorated plates and pans rise from a worn-out bed frame as an offbeat "flower bed."

"It's fun showing off the garden," Jim Powell tells me near a row of birdhouses fashioned after hillbilly shacks. "Visitors seem so interested and friendly, it's like having neighbors drop by."

That attitude, in the end, might just be the best Tyler tradition of all.

Writer-photographer **Randy Mallory** (www.RandyMallory.com) lives on a brick street in a 1930s Oil Boom house in the heart of the Azalea District.

TH ESSENTIALS

FOR HOMES & GARDENS INFORMATION or a historic landmarks guide, call the Tyler Convention and Visitors Bureau at 903/592-1661 (ext. 229) or 800/235-5712;

www.visittyler.com. For downtown events and attractions call the Heart of Tyler Main Street Program, 903/593-6905; www.heartoftyler.com.

The **Tyler Municipal Rose Garden** and **Tyler Rose Museum** are located at 420 Rose Park Dr., 903/597-3130, and host the 77th annual **Texas Rose Festival** (www.texasrosefestival.com) on Oct. 14-17.

The Smith County Master Gardeners hosts seminars on Oct. 5 and Nov. 2 in the **IDEA Garden**, located in the Rose Garden. On Oct. 9 the group hold a conference and plant sale in Harvey Hall, 2000 W. Front St., next to the Rose Garden. On May 7-8, 2011, the master gardeners host their annual **Home Garden Tour**. Call Smith County Extension Office, 903/590-2980; grovesite.com/mg/smg.

The 1859 Goodman-LeGrand House and Museum, 624 N. Broadway, 903/531-1286, hosts Earth-Kind rose seminars on Oct. 15-16, open house on Oct. 16 and Victorian Christmas on Dec. 9.

The **McClendon House**, 806 W. Houston, 903/592-3533 (www.mcclendonhouse.net) hosts Spirit Tours each Saturday night in October.

The 52nd annual **Tyler Azalea & Spring Flower Trail** takes place Mar. 18-Apr. 3, 2011. Call the CVB at 800/235-5712.

The 31st annual **Spring Homes Tour** takes place Mar. 25-27, 2011. Call Historic Tyler, 903/595-1960; www.historictyler.org.

Bergfeld Park, 1510 S. College Ave., 903/531-1370.

Gallery Main Street, 110 W. Erwin St., 903/593-6905.

Downtown Coffee Lounge, 200 W. Erwin St., 903 266-9192.

Jakes Tyler, 111 E. Erwin St., 903/526.0225, www.jakestyler.com.

Brady's Coffee, 309 Rusk St., 903/596-0508, www.bradyscoffee.com.

Bruno's Pizza, 1400 S. Vine St., 903/595-1676.

Chamblee's Rose Nursery, 10926 US 69 N.; 800/256-7673.

RESOURCES:

--Janie Menegay, Historic Tyler, re: general history & spring homes tour

--Billy Barham, 424 Lindsey Ln., Tyler, TX 75701

--Sue Adee re: IDEA garden

--Pat Turner re: Master Gardeners garden tour

--Patricia Heaton, Goodman Museum

--Craig Reiland, supervisor Rose Garden

--Rose Museum/Rose Festival: Julie Kidwell

--Tyler CVB: Justin Turner

--McClendon House: Judy Watson; re: Spirits event

--Mike Patterson, chr. Hist Preserv Bd, re: landmarks guide

--Jake's: Kamla Utz

--Beverly Abell, Main Street Director, Gallery Main Street

--Mark Chamblee; Chamblee's Rose Nursery

--Handbook Online for history

--<http://www.cets.sfasu.edu/smithco.html> for history

--re: Peoples Bank—National Register

--Jim Powell, Garden tour

--Brian and Sue McGuire (former Edmonds house)