
The George Harding Azalea Garden at River Farm

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Background

We were all saddened in February 1990 by the death of George Harding. George, who lived in Germantown, Maryland, was one of the leading azalea experts in the country, and one of the founding fathers of the Azalea Society of America. He was also one of our best-liked members: George loved people at least as much as he loved azaleas, and it showed. After George died, the Board of Directors suggested that a possible azalea garden at River Farm we had been discussing for some time would be a fitting memorial to George, since he was so interested in increasing the public awareness and popularity of his favorite plants.

River Farm is an historic 27-acre site on the Potomac River, just south of Washington, D.C., between Alexandria and Mount Vernon. Once owned by George Washington, it is now the headquarters of the American Horticultural Society (AHS). It's a lovely open area of rolling green lawns and mature trees, with a number of display gardens behind the main building, and a gentle slope down to the Potomac River.

The idea of an azalea garden started in the spring of 1989, when the Switzers, the Hobbs, and the Stellohs joined a number of other gardening folks on a delightful cruise and garden tour of the Windward Islands of the Caribbean, sponsored by the American Horticultural Society. On that cruise, Bob Hobbs, then-president of the Azalea Society, spoke to Carolyn Lindsay, then-president of the AHS, about the possibilities of the Azalea Society working more closely with the AHS. One of the ideas they discussed was the Azalea Society of America sponsoring an azalea display garden at the AHS River Farm headquarters.

Site

The specific garden site offered to us by the AHS is about 350 feet long and ranges from 20- to 80-feet deep, running east to west and open to the north. It includes some *Franklinias*, dogwoods and young Dawn Redwoods, with a number of mature Norway spruce, hemlocks and American hollies along the southern edge. The site fronts a grass strip and their main driveway to the north and is backed by a low brick wall to the south. It offers conditions ranging from full sun to almost full shade. It's a prime location seen by every visitor to River Farm (about 10,000 visitors each year from all over the world), since it's along the drive between the entrance and the parking lot and faces the front door of their headquarters building. It will show off azaleas to their best advantage as a border landscape, faced off by a large expanse of grass. This should make it a good source of ideas for using azaleas to many homeowners, who are usually interested in at least landscaping their borders if they have any interest in plants at all.

Although River Farm is planning a major renovation and revision, the garden site is outside of the area they are planning to change. Also, while River Farm hosts many large public gatherings with tents and booths each year, they will never encroach on this site because of its location at the south edge of their property, and their desire not to disturb their neighbor to the south.

History

In the summer of 1989, I took on the job of pursuing this idea of an azalea garden with the American Horticultural Society. After corresponding with them

for a while, I met with Frank Robinson, their Executive Director, in the fall of 1990 and reached general agreement with him on the site and garden concepts. In December 1990 I went with Ralph D'Amato, a landscape architect and member of the Brookside Gardens Chapter, to River Farm and helped him map the site of the garden. Mal Clark and I met with Frank Robinson in May 1991, showed him the map and some preliminary concept sketches that Ralph had drawn, and reached general agreement on the approach we were taking. The three local chapters, Ben Morrison, Brookside Gardens, and Northern Virginia, were approached in October 1991 to elicit their support in terms of garden committee members and their general commitment to support the garden. Two of the chapters were immediately enthusiastic in their support, and the other chapter is still considering how best to support it.

Purpose

The purpose of the garden is to use native azaleas, and other deciduous and evergreen hybrid azaleas appropriate to this climate, planted in the woodland edge setting at River Farms to be:

- A permanent memorial to George Harding.
- An educational and attractive display of azaleas.
- The focus for possible annual "Azalea Days" in the future. These "days" would be a day or a weekend each year publicized by AHS as an opportunity to see the garden at its peak, and to meet with members of the Azalea Society to have questions answered, to learn about the Azalea Society, and to sign up as new members. Such events have been quite successful in the past for other plant societies which already have display gardens at River Farm.

After the garden is installed, AHS is also interested in working with other plant societies, with the goal of augmenting the garden with companion plants such as ferns, bulbs and wildflowers, to be provided by those plant societies.

Current Status

The correspondence and meetings with AHS have resulted in agreement on a number of concepts: AHS will provide the space to work with; AHS would like us to feature native azaleas to the extent possible; we will design and plant the garden, after which the plants will become their property; and they will be responsible for the routine ongoing maintenance of the garden, with the Azalea Society responsible for periodic inspections of the garden, and for providing replacement plants and additional plants as they are needed.

At this time, eight persons have volunteered to work on the garden committee: Ralph D'Amato, Jean Cox, Milt and Joan Lerner, Nancy Stipa, George and Sue Switzer, and myself. About \$450 has been donated toward the garden expenses, against an expected need of about \$4000 for materials and supplies (we anticipate the plants and labor will be donated).

At the first committee meeting on January 25, 1991, the committee elected me as chairman. They set the spring of 1993 as a realistic target date for the garden dedication, and they adopted a work plan that covers these items:

1. Select the specific species and cultivars to use in the garden:
 - Natives and their hybrids.
 - George Harding favorites (for example, as discussed by Ryon Page in issues of *THE AZALEAN*).
 - Other azaleas, to show varieties of plant size/shape/foilage and bloom size/shape/color/time.
2. Finalize the garden design and plant list (in time for the June 1992 issue of *THE AZALEAN*).
3. Have the garden design approved by the AHS.
4. Prepare the garden site in the fall of 1992:
 - Outline the planting areas and paths (permanent edging?) - \$\$\$.
 - Dump leaves on the planting area (AHS has agreed to do this).
 - Till the area with the leaves,

along with sand, gypsum, fertilizer and other amendments.

5. Design an interpretive sign to describe the garden purpose, features, and plants.

6. Design a visitor handout with the sign information and ASA membership information.

7. Get the handout written, approved, and printed - \$\$\$.

8. Get the interpretive sign approved and constructed - \$\$\$.

9. Install the sign and other permanent items (water lines?) - \$\$\$.

10. Locate and acquire 300 to 600 mature plants (identify specific donors for the desired plants).

11. Plan the planting (line up workers for specific dates, get the plants, maybe stage them locally).

12. Plant and finish the garden (spring of 1993 target date).

13. Dedicate the garden, preferably:

- During the peak bloom season.
- Attended by the Harding family.
- Attended by ASA and AHS officials.
- With media coverage.

14. Maintain and improve the garden.

- AHS will do routine maintenance (watering, weeding).
- Azalea Society local chapters/members will inspect and replace or add plants as needed.

15. Sponsor and staff annual "Azalea Days" (local Azalea Society chapters).

16. Augment the garden with companion plants (AHS will ask other plant societies to do this).

Your Participation

There are at least four ways you can help to build the George Harding Azalea Garden:

- You can contribute your ideas.
- You can contribute your plants and other materials.
- You can contribute your money.

- You can contribute your time.

Each of these different ways to help is open to everyone, either as an individual or as a Chapter. Or both: think about how you're going to participate as an individual, and then bring the idea of Chapter participation up at your next Chapter meeting. We expect to have more information about the garden design and the desired plants in the June 1992 issue of *THE AZALEAN*, but don't wait until then—do something right now.

Chapters and individuals should send their donations of money for the garden expenses to Glenn Taylor, ASA Treasurer, 5203 Queensbury Avenue, Springfield, Virginia 22151, identified as being for the George Harding Azalea Garden. If you wish, you can identify your donation as being for a specific activity, such as one of the activities marked above with \$\$\$.

And don't worry about sending too much: we'll put the leftover money into a trust fund to handle future maintenance and replacement costs.

You should send your ideas and commitments to donate plants to Bob Stelloh, 15241 Springfield Road, Germantown, Maryland 20874. (Local members, think about the plants George gave you or sold to you, and which ones, or their offspring, you would like to give back for his memorial garden.)

George is gone, and he is missed by everyone who knew him. With your help, we can make this garden an outstanding memorial to George. The goal is to keep his memory alive by continuing to educate people and share the beauty of azaleas with them, just as George did.

Bob Stelloh and his wife, Denise, knew George for a number of years, and have a number of plants from George's garden, along with many fond memories of time spent with him. Bob recently retired from a career of computer programming, and is currently marketing a garden information management computer program he has developed for public gardens. □