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# George Harding Azalea Garden - A Second Progress Report

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The overall garden concept and progress was reported in previous issues of *THE AZALEAN*.<sup>1</sup> In summary, the purposes of the George Harding Azalea Garden are to be a memorial to George Harding and to carry on his work of exposing more people to the beauty and versatility of azaleas. The garden is on the grounds of River Farm, a 27-acre estate formerly owned by George Washington and now the headquarters of the American Horticultural Society. River Farm is along the Potomac River in Virginia, midway between Alexandria and Mount Vernon. The garden site is a strip of land running west from the river, about 400' long and ranging from 30' to 90' deep, beside the entrance road to River Farm and facing the front door of the headquarters building. Trees on the site include a number of mature hemlocks and Norway spruce, as well as some young dawn redwoods, franklinia, Virginia cedar and Norway spruce.

A garden committee was formed in late 1991 of members from the Brookside Gardens, Ben Morrison and Northern Virginia chapters. In 1992, the committee and other volunteers agreed on the garden site and the overall garden design, solicited money and plants from ASA members and friends for the garden, spent over 800 hours in site preparation and garden design work, and planned on a spring 1993 planting effort and garden dedication.

We didn't achieve the spring planting, and we are now running about one year behind our original schedule. However, the good news is that we have accumulated over \$5,000 in garden funds and have pledges of over 500 plants, thanks to the generosity of our members and others; we are still progressing, and the garden is slowly taking shape, to the point that it is now beginning to be recognizable as a garden in progress. As described below, the recent accomplishments include installation of an irrigation system, and another 800 hours spent in site preparation, developing a detailed planting plan, and actually starting to make the garden—making paths and planting some azaleas!

## Plants

Initially, the committee selected azalea cultivars for the garden based on availability and preferences. We felt that every azalea in the garden should be generally available, so that visitors would be able to go to a local nursery to buy any azalea they saw in the garden and particularly admired. The committee has now decided to drop the availability requirement, and instead to propagate any azaleas in the garden which are not generally available. The American Horticultural Society has agreed to let us make those azaleas available for sale each year at a scheduled and publicized "Azalea Day" at River Farm, with the proceeds to be added to the maintenance fund for the azalea garden.

The preferences we considered included George Harding's known preferences, the collective preferences of the committee members, and the preferences of other interested Azalea Society of America members. We then selected particular cultivars based on those preferences, and only solicited pledges of those selected cultivars, usually three plants each for small cultivars or one plant for large cultivars. Now we're a little more relaxed about it, and generally work any azaleas we receive into the design whether they match the preferences or not. Also, it turns out that the cultivars we solicited aren't necessarily the cultivars we need, since we had not really considered the garden design when we solicited the numbers of different cultivars, and the design

largely dictates the numbers of plants of particular colors, bloom times, sizes and growth habits that we need. For example, since the site has a long back wall which we need to "hide" to control the view, we need many tall upright azaleas. And, since the garden is divided into many beds, we need many low spreading azaleas to go along the edges of the beds.

Another expressed desire was for contributions of nicely shaped plants which were about one-half to two-thirds their mature size, so the garden would "look right" from the very beginning. That was definitely wishful thinking. Plants from a nursery are what the nursery has, usually nicely grown plants in pots, anywhere from one to ten gallons, while the plants from an individual contributor are what the contributor has, usually mature plants dug from their garden, and sometimes rather poorly shaped specimens because of crowding. Our approach for the poorly shaped plants is to let them be for now, to maximize next year's blooms, and then to plan on pruning and shaping them later, either just after they bloom, or in the course of taking cuttings.

We now have pledges for over 300 different azalea species and cultivars, for a total of well over 500 azaleas. We also have three of the new *Cornus florida* x *C. kousa* crosses acquired from Rutgers University and donated to the garden by the American Horticultural Society, a sourwood (*Oxydendron arboreum*, which was one of George Harding's favorite native trees), a *Styrax japonicus*, and a planned-for *Stewartia pseudocamellia*. Of these plants, about half have been received and will be planted yet this year, and the other plants will be added next spring.

## Irrigation

While the Washington, D. C., area receives about 50 inches of precipitation annually, which is about the same as Seattle, rain in this area is not as predictable as it is in Seattle, and our gardens typically need supplemental water in the spring or summer for reliable growth, or just to keep the plants alive. Because of this, we agreed with the American Horticultural Society to contract for an irrigation system, and to pay a third of

the cost, with the American Horticultural Society to donate the other two-thirds. We also decided to wait for the water before we started to plant, both to make it easier to install the irrigation system and to ensure that our plants could easily be watered. That was a good decision for 1992, since we had a very hot, dry summer. However, this prevented any planting in the spring, since it took longer than we had anticipated to get the funds, select the contractor, and get the system installed.

The irrigation system was partially installed by the end of September, to the point that we now have four hydrants at about 100' intervals and can at least hand-water any plant with a 50' hose or a bucket. The complete system will also include popup sprinklers, impact sprinklers and a semi-automatic control system with four separately controlled watering zones. The different zones are important for this site because while it is generally poorly drained clay soil, those parts of the site with mature trees give the effect of good drainage. When the complete system is in place and operational, it can be turned on manually when needed, and will then turn itself off after delivering a preset amount of water to each of the four zones.

## Design

The garden design developed by the committee includes a central path running the length of the garden, with short paths leading from the edge of the garden into the central path about every 75' along the length of the garden. We feel this arrangement of paths invites visitors into the garden and encourages them to walk through the entire garden without giving them choices to go here instead of there and thus miss part of the garden. It also makes long slender garden beds, about three to five plants deep, such that visitors can stay on the paths and still be fairly close to any plant.

Each of the beds has one or two overall color themes, such as purple-pink, or orange-red and yellow-pink (salmon). Within a bed, the plants are generally sited by ultimate size and habit, with low spreading plants near the path, then medium height plants, and then tall plants

near the center. The plants are also sited by bloom time and color, to make pleasing associations that bloom together, to have pockets of plants blooming together rather than an isolated plant in bloom here and there, and to have those plants that are in bloom at any particular time spread throughout the garden rather than being clustered in one location. (Yes, we recognize it will take years of observation and rearranging of the plants to more completely achieve those goals.)

The garden plan consists of a set of computer-generated maps and lists.<sup>2</sup> The map shows the location of each plant by a circle showing the approximate ultimate diameter of the plant, with a number which cross-references the circle to the lists. The lists show the name of each plant, its characteristics (color, bloom time, plant size, growth habit, hybrid group), its contributor, the number of the garden bed it's in, and its coordinates<sup>3</sup> on the map. These maps and lists have been revised many times to reflect which plants are actually received, since they are typically different from the plants which were pledged a year or two ago. Also, different quantities are needed than were originally pledged of plants with particular growth habits and sizes and colors and bloom times, to maintain the design concepts as the design evolves.

## Planting

Since the beginning of September 1993, the committee and other volunteers have been working at the garden every Wednesday and Saturday, weather permitting, and working on other days to make up the time when we get rained out. The primary activity has been weeding, since the leaves we tilled in last year have produced bumper crops of maple, beech and other seedling trees, and Bermuda and crab grass – if the clay soil does as well with the azaleas as it did with the weeds, we'll have a terrific garden in a very short time. Now we are also preparing the paths by rough grading with shovels and rakes, rolling, and spreading wood chips.<sup>4</sup> And, finally, we're getting to plant some azaleas!

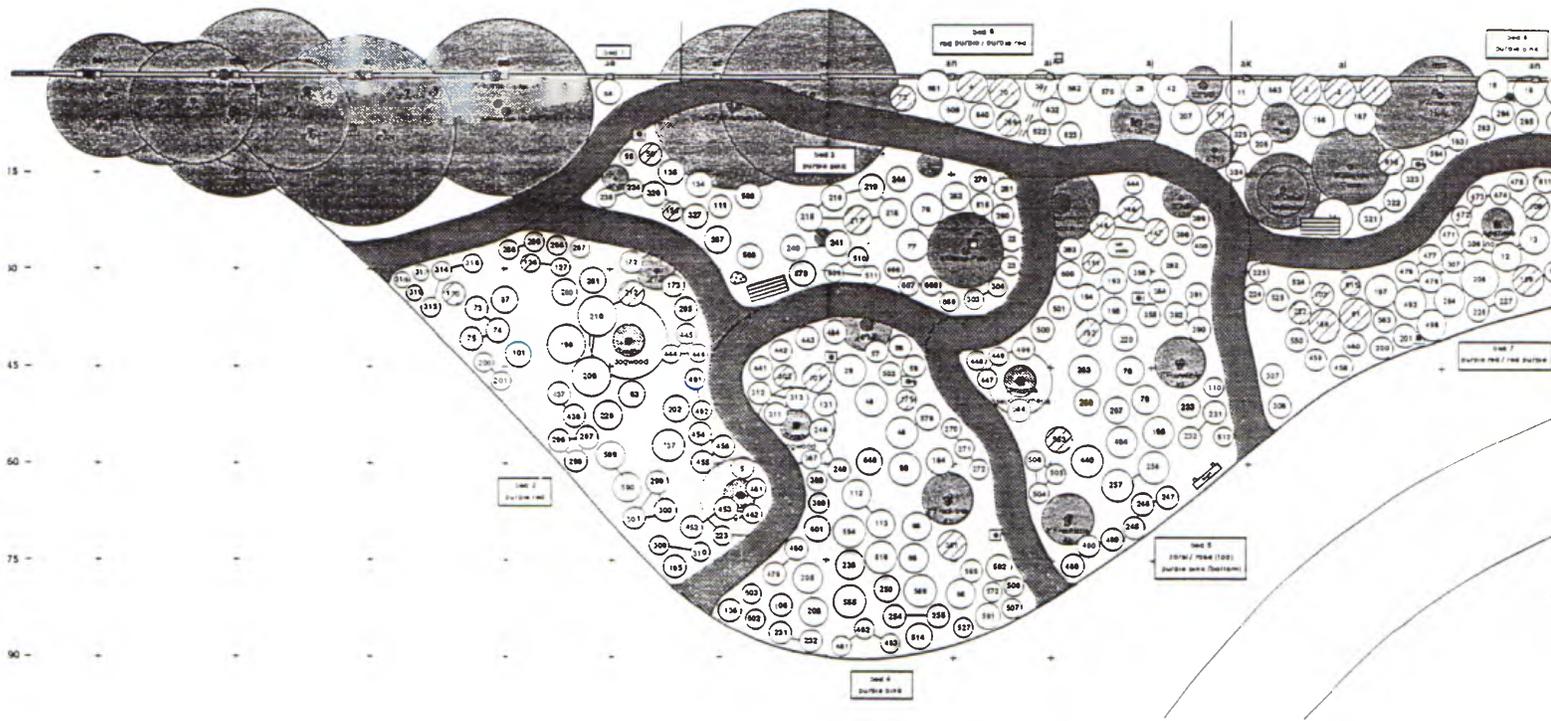
As a plant is delivered to the site, one person finds it on the list to see the plant's

map number and bed, finds that number on the map to see the general location of the plant, and tags the plant with a temporary tag with its name, map number and the map coordinates. Two people with 100' tapes then use the map coordinates to measure from the proper two posts in the back wall to locate the correct spot on the ground for the plant, and put it there. Another person then plants it, typically planting high because of the clay soil, and in some locations, poor drainage. Finally, another person mulches the plant with some donated pine bark and reports back that it has been planted, so it can be checked off on the map and the lists.

At least that was the planned approach, but it's hard to anticipate everything that can upset the plan, and it takes a while when anything out of the ordinary happens. For example, when a plant arrives that isn't on the list, it must first be integrated into the design, considering the available spaces in the garden and the size, color, growth habit and bloom time of the azalea. That also happens when a plant arrives that's on the list but isn't on the map for some reason. Or when the number of the plant has been changed on the list but not on the map, or vice versa. Or when you've walked out 50' or 75' or so with the tape and discover that the tape is on the wrong side of a big tree next to the wall, and you have to go all the way back. Or (since the map was drawn based on a fairly rough survey that is only good to within a foot or so) when the map coordinates, which are accurate to the inch, put the plant on top of an existing tree, or in the middle of a path – it doesn't help to be exactly right when you're approximately wrong. Or when the person measuring the coordinates or writing them on the label had transposed part of the information. Or when the plant that the list says is low and spreading arrives, and it's tall and upright because of its particular growing conditions or because the list is wrong (or is it because the plant is mislabeled – it's pretty hard to tell in the fall). Or when ...?

## Summary

While the garden currently has a group of plants here, a bit of path completed



there, and big patches of Bermuda grass or crab grass and big piles of wood chips or pine bark here and there, the committee is very pleased to see it starting to come together and look like a garden, at least in spots. While it's probably not the way you would typically plant your garden, it works when the plants are arriving at random, and you have a handful of overworked volunteers trying to do everything at once before it gets too cold.

It's turning out to be a magnificent garden at a very prominent site, fitting of its title and its purpose. With a lot of work, and an increasing amount of flexibility, we are getting it planted. Now we'll have the winter to line up the remaining plants we need, decide exactly where each of those plants will be located, develop a visitor's brochure for the garden, and get ready for another planting effort in the early spring of 1994. The dedication is now tentatively planned for May 1994, in time for the blooming season.

### Help

It's not too late to help, whether with money, plants, or just plain work. The

garden fund still contains almost \$4,000, but we can always use more money, since we still have a number of major expenditures coming up, such as printing the brochure and getting signs for the garden. We would also like to fund the ongoing garden maintenance costs from the interest on the fund, so the garden can last forever from a financial standpoint. Specific needs also include the *Stewartia*, and a number of garden benches which could include small brass memorial plates.

When the weather turns cold, and we get a chance to see where we stand, we will prepare a list of the particular azaleas we would like to have to complete the garden, and mail that list to the chapter presidents so they can circulate it to the membership. Or, if you would like a copy, ask Bob Stelloh around January 1994.

Finally, if you live in the general Washington, D. C., area, we can use more help as we finish the planting next spring. We will probably be working on Wednesdays and Saturdays, weather permitting, usually from 9AM to about 1 or 2PM. To get in on the fun, call Bob Stelloh at (301) 840-1714 or Milt Lerner at (703) 765-0225

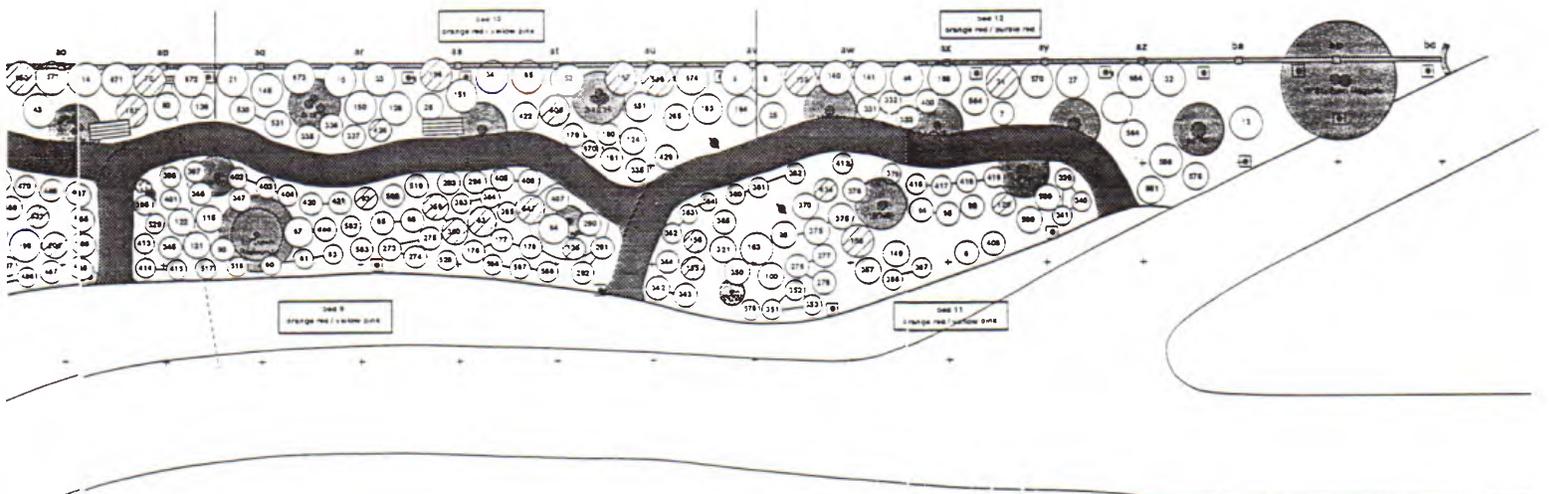
for driving directions, and to see whether we'll be there on the day you're interested in helping. River Farm is at 7931 East Boulevard Drive, just off the George Washington Parkway, about five miles south of US 495.

### Notes

1. The George Harding Azalea Garden at River Farm, **THE AZALEAN**, March 1992; The George Harding Azalea Garden at River Farm - Part II, **THE AZALEAN**, June 1992; and George Harding Azalea Garden - A Progress Report, **THE AZALEAN**, December 1992.

2. As anyone with a computer knows, "computer-generated" is somewhat of a misnomer. "Computer-assisted and printed" is really more like it, since one spends quite a bit of time developing and revising the map and lists, and the computer helps primarily by adding up quantities to give the totals, and by sorting the lists by name or number.

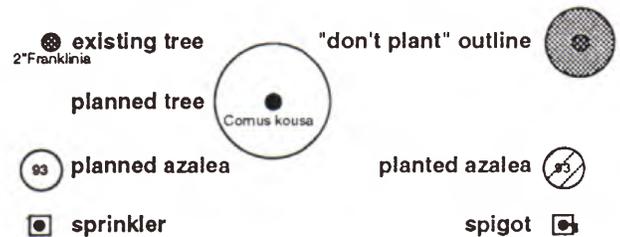
3. The garden has a low brick wall along its back edge, with posts about every 15' which we labelled consecutively from left to right as post A, B, ...,



## George Harding Azalea Garden at River Farm

### Design Concepts

- visitor access paths to get into the garden and among the plants
  - minimum number of paths, minimum choice at intersections
  - maximum access to plants
  - equally spaced garden access points, equally sized beds
- plants are arranged by size, color and bloom-time, not hybrid group
  - size: low toward paths, tall in centers of beds and along the wall
  - color: beds with color themes, whites as visual breaks
  - bloom-time: same time clumps are spread throughout the garden



BA, BB, etc. The coordinates of a plant are its distance from any two of those posts, such as A15C34 to show that it is 15' from post A and 34' from post C. Thus, we can plan the garden on paper, measure the plant coordinates on the map, and use those coordinates to precisely locate the plants on the ground according to the plan.

4. Not just any old wood chips, but a truckload of wood chips recently created by pruning an enormous 200 year old osage orange tree (*Maclura pomifera*) behind the main house at River Farm. This tree is said to have been given to George Washington by Thomas Jefferson, so our visitors will be walking on history!

### Note Added in Proof

A lot more has been done in the month of November, with the help of some very nice weather on some of the workdays and in spite of a few cold and/or wet workdays. The good news is, that due to the dedicated efforts of the committee members and several other volunteers, the weeds are all gone, the paths are all made, and almost 400 plants are in the ground.

The latest planting efforts have gone much more quickly than the earlier efforts. Since we now have a number of plants carefully located by their measurements, we can use those plants as markers, to locate the plants that go between them by eye. For example, as you can see by looking at the map, the new plant is about halfway between this plant and that plant, and just a little bit off of a straight line between them, and it "looks right" right about here. So, instead of spending ten minutes or more just to locate one plant, we can locate many of the plants on the ground almost as fast as we can find them on the map and get them to the right bed. Of course, there are still the problem children that can't be found on the map, or the space for them on the ground doesn't match the way it looks on the map.

The bad news is that only the current crop of weeds is gone, and we'll still have to take care of their offspring next year, and the next year, ..., and the next year. And, shortly after the paths were all outlined, smoothed and rolled, and the historical wood chips spread (the truckload of chips, about ten cubic yards, just did cover all the paths), the rains came. We

had a record rain in early December, between five and six inches in one day, and that much water in a short time definitely showed us the drainage patterns in the garden. It moved parts of the paths and much of the bark and wood chips we had spread between the plants. Interestingly, since we've generally planted high, it left the bark around the plants, and just moved the mulch from between the plants to the low spots. Of course, some of those low spots were parts of the paths. And, since we were getting tired of tripping over the stakes that outlined the paths, we had just pulled all of them up. But all in all, the record rain did surprisingly little damage, and we're reasonably confident such a rain will do even less damage in the future, when all the area is mulched to slow down the water and help it soak in.

*Bob Stelloh and his wife, Denise, knew George Harding for a number of years and have many plants from his nursery, along with many fond memories of time spent with him. Bob retired a few years ago, and is currently developing and marketing a computer program for garden information management.* □