
George Harding Memorial Azalea Garden— A Major Milestone

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Dedication Ceremony

The George Harding Memorial Azalea Garden, at the River Farm site of the American Horticultural Society headquarters, was dedicated on the morning of Saturday, May 14, 1994. It was an appropriately beautiful sunny day. The Hardings were well represented, with 35 (out of 37) of George's children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren on hand to take part in the ceremony.

The dedication program started with some talks, continued with a ribbon-cutting ceremony, and finished with refreshments, garden tours and general discussion. Dr. Marc Cathey, President of the American Horticultural Society, spoke first about the significance of the garden to the general public and to the plant societies. Malcolm Clark, our Society President and a very good friend of George Harding, then spoke about George, with an emphasis on his integrity, humanity, and basic good-heartedness (as evidenced by our building a garden in his honor, and by so many of his descendants in attendance). Finally, Bob Stelloh spoke about the garden itself, and the people involved in planning and building it (and, to his horror, omitted mentioning the Swells as contributors, and of course they were there to hear the omission—at least they could also hear the apology).

The Hardings then participated in the ribbon-cutting ceremony to formally open the garden to the public. As a special treat, Lynn Hertel, a professor at the

George Washington University School of Music, performed on her flute before and after the talks. The soft clear voice of the flute floats through the garden as a pleasant background sound, somewhat akin to bird songs, and Ms. Hertel is an accomplished flutist with a great deal of experience, in gardens as well as in concert halls.

Building the Garden

The purpose of the garden is to be a lasting memorial to George Harding, to carry on his work of popularizing the beauty, variety, and versatility of

Mrs. George Harding was joined by her family in cutting the ribbon at the Harding Garden dedication. Photo credit: Robert W. Hobbs.



centuries, the winter form and leaf color are the most important elements to use in selecting azaleas for a garden—natural or trained. We at River Farm look forward to viewing these seasonal changes, connecting them to the many cultivars and species available, and issuing with the Azaleas Society suggestions for new landscape opportunities. And, of course, we will also learn which types have persistent and tough flowers to survive our seasons of cold, heat, drought, flood, and pests. Within the azalea already exists the "elite forms" on which we can build our new environmentally responsible and sustainable gardens.

We also need to find large type azaleas, in plant size and flower size, color, contrast, which can be used in the new more natural landscapes. The azalea is already pre-sold in the minds of all gardeners. We must now work to meet those dreams with realities. The Harding Memorial Garden at the AHS is truly a good beginning.

Let the education begin! □

Dedication of Azalea Garden/Collection at the George Washington River Farm of the American Horticultural Society (AHS) Alexandria, Virginia

H. Marc Cathey, President

American Horticultural Society

Any collector of plants must continually seek to update the kinds of plants which are included in his gardens. There is no group of plants that needs this reappraisal more than the azalea—deciduous or evergreen. Although they are some of the most profitable plants to market for the nursery industry, the selections available are often limited to a few trusted cultivars such as 'Delaware Valley White', 'Coral Bells', and 'Hinodegiri'. These selections tend to be planted over and over again because of their tolerances to pests and stresses, while the year-round landscape needs are ignored. Azaleas, like all of the plants used to create a garden, must not only contribute to the structure and layers of the garden, but must also display seasonal changes that make the garden exciting to visit all twelve months of the year. Many gardeners have come to take azaleas for granted as being a ten-day wonder of color and an 11-month/20-day green blob.

The New Azalea Garden/Collection at the George Washington's River Farm offers the visitor a full statement of how azaleas can be selected to be integral players in the New American Garden Style. The more than 300 cultivars exhibit the full range of flowering, foliage, and form potentials of azaleas, while identifying the seasonal changes and design potential. In fact, as Asian gardeners have known for

azaleas. The garden runs along the south border of River Farm and covers just under a half acre. It was designed in late 1990 by Ralph D'Amato, a landscape architect and member of the Society. That design was then refined and built by 21 volunteers, primarily the "steadfast eight": Jean Cox, Joan and Milt Lerner, Jane Newman, Denise and Bob Stelloh, and Sue and George Switzer. They came twice a week during the fall of 1992 to clear the land, spread 200 cubic yards of composted leaves and rototill the soil. They then came twice a week during the fall of 1993 to lay out the paths, weed, and plant the azaleas. Finally, they came twice a week this spring for more weeding and planting, along with improving the paths and refining the drainage patterns discovered during the winter rains. The steadfast eight were ably assisted by Carol Allen and Irmo, Lou Aronica, Buck Clagett, Bob and Bee Hobbs, Bill McIntosh, Deac Moore, Leslie and David Nanney, and Nancy and Larry Stipa.

The garden currently includes over 500 azaleas and a few ornamental trees, with about 100 more azaleas yet to be acquired and planted. The plants have been contributed by both individuals and nurseries. The individual contributors are the American Horticultural Society (several of the new *Cornus florida* x *C. kousa* introductions from Rutgers University and a host of interplanted daffodils), Lou Aronica, Brookside Gardens (Phil Normandy—some Satsukis from the Brookside Gardens collection at McCrillis Gardens), Jean Cox, Joan and Milt Lerner, Jane Newman, Denise and Bob Stelloh, Bob Stewart, Sue and George Switzer. The nurseries are Azalea Trace Nursery (Wanda and Charlie Hanners), Chandler Gardens (Malcolm Clark), Eastern Shore Nursery (Robin Rinaca), Marshy Point Nursery (Harry Weiskittel), Northern Neck Nursery (David Lay), Roslyn Nursery (Harriet and Phil Waldman), Shepherd Hill Farm (Gerry Bleyer), Stubbs Shrubs (Eleanor and Art Stubbs), Swell Azaleas (Nancy and Leon Swell), Transplant Nursery (the Beasleys), and White's Nursery (Mike White, one of George Harding's grandsons, who is carrying on George's tra-

dition as an azalea grower). While some of the plants from the nurseries are young, there are already enough mature plants to make it look like a proper azalea garden.

Financing the Garden

Although all plants and labor have been donated, the garden could not have been built without the financial help of over 40 members and friends, who have contributed a total of \$5,700.00 to date. The "top ten" cash contributors contributed \$4,500.00 of the total. They are the Ben Morrison Chapter, Brookside Gardens Chapter, Gartrell Chapter, Northern Virginia Chapter, and Richmond Chapter of the Azalea Society, the Mid-Atlantic Chapter of the American Rhododendron Society, and Pegg Johnston, Bill McIntosh, Deac Moore, David Sauer, Don Voss, and members of the Harding family. Some of the money has already been used to pay for one-third of the irrigation system, several memorial benches, herbicide, plant labels, equipment rental, and just recently a large redwood sign. More is earmarked for brochures, mulch, and timbers for the paths. After the garden is completed, all remaining funds will be invested. The interest from that investment, along with proceeds from sales of rooted cuttings from the garden, will be used to purchase mulch and other on-going supplies. The goal is to ensure that funds are available to keep the garden well maintained into the foreseeable future.

Notable non-cash contributions include two-thirds of the irrigation system and ten yards of wood chips (from an historic Osage orange tree said to have been planted by George Washington as a gift from Thomas Jefferson, which made very attractive paths until the rains washed it out) from the American Horticultural Society, 200 yards of composted leaves delivered by Arlington County, and 55 yards of pine bark delivered by T. H. Blue and Company of South Carolina (although we did pay an unplanned towing charge to pull their rig out of the mud last fall, after trying to do it ourselves for at least three hours!).

Still More to be Done

This fall, the garden committee is acquiring and planting some more azaleas to fill out the garden (we're now down to once a week). And we're still looking for someone to donate a nice ornamental tree, preferably a *Stewartia pseudocamellia* or something similar (upright and fairly open, with nice bark and flowers, suitable for a semi-shady location). Finally, we're beginning to discuss companion plants, such as groundcovers, ferns, hostas, and wildflowers with the American Horticultural Society, which will coordinate with other plant societies to acquire and plant them under our general supervision.

This winter, the committee will be working on a brochure for garden visitors. We will also be planning our first Azalea Day at River Farm for next spring. Each annual Azalea Day will be our opportunity to sell rooted cuttings of the less-available plants from the garden, answer questions about azaleas, and recruit new members for the Azalea Society of America.

River Farm is a beautiful 27-acre property bordered by the Potomac River, near Washington, D.C. It's located at 7931 East Boulevard Drive, just off the George Washington Memorial Parkway, about halfway between Alexandria, Virginia, and Mount Vernon. It's about ten miles south of National Airport and five miles south of the I-495 Beltway. River Farm is open to the public without charge from 8:30AM to 5:00PM, Monday through Friday and some weekends. Call them at (703) 768-5700 for more detailed directions and further information.

Bob Stelloh and his wife, Denise, knew George Harding 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 retired several years ago from a career of computer programming. They currently market and support a computer program Bob has developed to help public gardens and serious plant collectors manage their plant information. □