
Azalea Gardens

Azaleas of Reflection Riding Arboretum and Botanical Garden

J. E. Schild, Jr. – Hixon, Tennessee

Reflection Riding Arboretum and Botanical Garden covers 300 acres on the western slope of Lookout Mountain in Chattanooga, Tennessee. The Arboretum is bounded by Lookout Creek on the west and the Chattanooga-Chickamauga Battlefield Park System on three sides, thus creating an urban pocket forest within eight minutes of downtown Chattanooga. Native azaleas and very large evergreen rhododendrons are indigenous to the Arboretum. As a drive-through arboretum, one is reminded of Cades Cove in the Great Smoky Mountains with its lush forest, open meadows, riparian banks, and wildlife.

Canada geese and wild ducks are found on the two large ponds, while keeper size fish navigate the depths. Red and gray fox, bobcat, raccoon, beaver, and white tail deer are frequently observed. Wild turkey may be observed in large flocks. Several species of hawk and owl may be seen while an occasional overflight of a bald eagle brings everyone out to watch it soaring in the updrafts.

Reflection Riding is a listed historic site with much to offer in Civil War and Native American history. Many trees still standing date back prior to the Civil War. A huge white oak bears a sign noting its existence in 1869. A giant tulip poplar near Davis Spring dates before that. The three-acre vegetable and butterfly garden area was farmed by the Cherokee, and a few hundred yards south is a leg of the Sisca Trail.

One may drive through the Arboretum on the three plus miles of roads or, for the hikers and walkers, there are nearly fourteen miles of trails to explore. Portions of the trail system connect with the National Park System trails, and one may hike to historic locations such as Lookout Point Park on top of Lookout Mountain. But, it is the shrubs, trees, vines and wildflowers that draw public attention to the Arboretum.

Spring at Reflection Riding is truly an amazing time with large drifts of wildflowers in bloom. Many of the flowers were planted through the years, but large numbers were in place from the beginning. As a natural landscape park, the emphasis has been on keeping its visual impact as free of man-made structures as possible.

My association with Reflection Riding began when I was asked to consult with the governing board on the proposed site location and possible azaleas for an ericaceous garden. At the time, only azaleas indigenous to the area were being considered, but with a shift in policy and plan, all of the native species were allowed, expanding the possibilities of bloom time and color. In 1982, the late Thomas Kane of Pleasantville, New York, in his Conservation and Development Plan, first proposed setting aside the three-acre tract for development of the habitat reserved for members of the ericaceous family.

In 1993, I took several truckloads of staff and volunteers of the Tennessee Valley Chapter of the American Rhododendron Society (ARS) to my Cumberland Mountain property, and we located and dug a large number of select native azaleas for installation at the Riding. In 1994, Mr. Olan Holsomback, a respected rhododendron breeder and grower of Chickamauga, Georgia, donated a large collection of native azaleas and evergreen rhododendron for inclusion in the garden plus another site to be later named Holsomback Garden.

In 1995, the Garden was dedicated to the memory of P. Robert Philp and is supported by his family, the Friends of Reflection Riding, and members of the Tennessee Valley Chapter-ARS. Reflection Riding is honored to be chosen by Katherine, Bob Jr., and Clara as a place for remembrance.

Little did I know in 1993 that I would be chosen as a board member, then in 1996, be asked to take the helm as Landscape Manager. To the credit of the governing board and Philp family, the Philp Garden is evolving into a regional center for the study of the Ericaceae (Heath Family), especially for its collection of azaleas and rhododendrons native to the eastern United States. All of the natives are represented, except *Rhododendron oblongifolium*, through donations and propagation in Reflection Riding's nursery and greenhouse.

Many azaleas were collected from cuttings or seed taken from wild stands or garden varieties. There is much diversity within species, so particular care was taken in the selection process, especially to display the range of colors and growth habits. With bloom time from early April through August, there is color to be observed in the garden from the road that passes through it or by foot-trails that allow close-up observation. All of the shrubs and trees in the Garden are properly labeled with both common and botanical names for ease of identification, study and comparison. In and around the plantings, one will also find mountain laurel, holly, hemlock, ferns and thousands of wildflowers. Pathways wind through the garden, and a Memorial Bench is located at its center for contemplation and reflection.

Situated on a site with a western exposure, the Garden presented a rather difficult aspect. In 1993, selected trees were removed to provide sufficient sun exposure for good azalea bud set. Then, in 1995, the remnants of hurricane Opal came through and removed even more trees than was desired, leaving the site more open to hot exposure. With an irrigation system in place in the Arboretum, the TVC-ARS volunteered to help staff expand it into the Philp Garden. This has paid great dividends, allowing the shrubs to prosper and giving additional room for extensive new plantings, with

many more to be added. The deep, sandy loam soil and sloping landscape provides proper drainage, and the application of Milorganite three or four times a year provides the shrubs with nutrients and deer-repellent qualities.

Fragrant species are planted close to paths and the bench to add to the experience. All shrubs are mulched with composted wood chips the staff collects after storm events or from the fallen limbs an arboretum this size seems to accumulate. The mulch creates the microclimate around the shrubs needed for good plant health and vigor.

Within the Philp Garden, one will see and experience the following, by local bloom time: *R. austrinum*, *R. periclymenoides*, *R. canescens*, *R. atlanticum*, *R. alabamense*, *R. canadense*, *R. flammeum*, *R. prinophyllum*, *R. viscosum*, *R. calendulaceum*, *R. cumberlandense*, *R. arborescens*, *R. prunifolium*, and *R. serrulatum* [now included in *R. viscosum*, Ed.]. Within each species, we have introduced as many shrubs as are available, thus presenting the broad color ranges found in the wild. There are a number of natural hybrids included within the collection and the following evergreen rhododendrons: *R. minus* var. *chapmanii*, *R. catawbiense*, *R. catawbiense* var. *insularis*, *R. minus*, *R. maximum*, and an example of the red *R. maximum* 'Mt. Mitchell', donated by Burton Johnston, President of the TVC-ARS.

Reflection Riding is fortunate to be located in Zone 7a, a climate suitable to grow almost all azaleas and rhododendron. Through trial and error, we have yet to find a *R. occidentale* that will survive our summer heat and humidity without getting powdery mildew disease and dying.

Reflection Riding staff is propagating cuttings of high-bush blueberries, found on Winesprings Bald, to be included in the Garden. These shrubs have exquisite violet-pink leaves on new growth and make a wonderful display. They are of course, ericaceous.

At worst, as something of an azalea nut, or at best, an azalea chaser, I am al-

ways looking for a new plant of merit. After thirty years of search, I have found some real jewels, and a few are now residing in the Philp Garden. From North Chickamauga Creek Gorge, I rooted a Swamp Azalea with bluish-green foliage and dramatic bloom. Cuttings of this plant were rooted, and a specimen is in the Garden. From the Cumberland Mountain, I propagated a number of the Cumberland Azalea with obvious and overzealous natural breeding with the Sweet Azalea. The blooms are shades of pink, apricot, and pinkish-red, and clones are included.

The Philp Garden is a young landscape with many wonderful azaleas in place and, as it matures, it will surely grow in beauty, stature and recognition through the region. The Philp family has endowed the Garden to ensure its continued maintenance, loving care and planned expansion. Spring at Reflection Riding is always a fantastic time to visit. During the Wildflower Festival, the Arboretum conducts walks, mini workshops, and has a huge native plant sale with expert advice on planting and care. Of course, any season is good for a visit and even the winter months give one a unique view of an exquisite natural landscape.

For those wishing to visit the Arboretum, you may call for directions, write for a brochure, use e-mail, or visit the Web page using the following:

Reflection Riding Arboretum &
Botanical Garden
400 Garden Road
Chattanooga, TN 37419
Tel. 423-821-9582
Web: <http://virtual.chattanooga.net/riding>
E-mail: rriding@chattanooga.net

Joe Schild has been involved in the nursery business for the past 30 years, and operated his own business since 1988. He was the founding president of the Tennessee Valley Chapter of the ARS and currently serves as its vice president and program chairman. He is the current vice president of the Azalea Society of America, a member of the Tennessee Nursery and Landscape Association (TNLA), and just retired as the Landscape

Manager for Reflection Riding.

Joe presents a number of programs on azaleas, rhododendron, and native plants to various garden groups, other chapters, and TNLA training programs. In the world of the rhododendron he is known as the Azalea Nut and will chase their blooming flowers all over the Southeast.

[Information about Reflection Riding's design from their website, Ed.] The history of Reflection Riding can be found in a thoughtful analysis of its name. Firstly, the concept of a "riding grounds" is the theme of the gardens. Englishman Thomas Whately defined a "riding" [in his *Observations on Modern Gardening* (1770)] as a road winding through a natural landscape that offers a variety of pleasant experiences. The idea is to facilitate man's journey through nature, by providing a trail that highlights areas of particular interest and beauty. Secondly, "reflection" describes the special beauty of Reflection Riding: the delicate reflections of the surrounding mountains and trees in the park's ponds and creek, and, more importantly, the aesthetic and spiritual exhilaration [one feels] in response to the grandeur of the landscape, which provides a peaceful and quiet haven for introspection.

Reflection Riding was developed during the 1940's by John Chambliss, a self-educated horticulturist and landscape architect, from the consolidation of three small farms. Chambliss's interest in English gardens and regional native plants fueled his vision of the Riding, and he enlisted the help of friends and horticultural experts from both America and England to complete it. Several important landscape architects provided their services in the construction of the gardens, most notably Sylvia Hunt of Kent, England, President of the Royal Society of Landscape Architects, and Gordon Cooper, from Cleveland, Ohio, the long-time editor of *Landscape Architecture*, whose vision of Reflection Riding as an outdoor arboretum continues to define

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the purpose of the gardens. More recently, Thomas Kane, a landscape architect from New York State, came to evaluate the Riding to formulate a long-range plan for its preservation and future development.

The Riding has received prestigious awards. In 1967, Mr. and Mrs. John Chambliss received the Garden Club of America's award for conservation and education. In 1989, the American Horticultural Society (AHS) gave its Catherine Sweeny Award to Susan Irvine, the Chambliss' daughter and heir, for her commitment to the park, to recognize both the significance of Reflection Riding as a botanical garden and Irvine's devotion to it. The Riding is listed as an AHS reciprocal garden. Most recently, the Riding has been profiled in the Garden Club of America's archives at the Smithsonian Institution.



Lovely path through the grove in the Perkins Garden during 1999 Azalea Festival.

Photography by Cindy Yavinsky.



Native azalea, R. calendulaceum at Reflection Riding.

Photography by Joe Schild.



Some outstanding azaleas in Perkins Garden on the campus of Landon School. The lavender azalea is R. yedoense var. poukhanense. The brilliant orange is an unknown deciduous azalea planted in the 1940s or 1950s.

Photography by Cindy Yavinsky.



Early spring in Philp Garden during dogwood bloom.

Photography by Joe Schild.



Example of natural hybrids at Reflection Riding:

R. canescens x R. alabamense.

Photography by Joe Schild.