

Reflection Riding Arboretum and Botanic Garden

David Hopkins — Chattanooga, Tennessee

Reflection Riding Arboretum and Botanic Garden is a 300-acre natural area with designed paths (ridings) and gardens located between the western slope of Lookout Mountain and Lookout Creek, within 15 minutes of downtown Chattanooga. The Riding has a unique combination of assets:

- A magnificent variety of native trees, shrubs, flowers, and grasses, including 1101 verified species.
- A rich spectrum of scenic beauty blending forested mountain slopes, meadows, woodland gardens, ponds and creek, winding roads and paths, and dramatic vistas of Lookout and Raccoon Mountains.
- Historic features, including Native American trails and cabins and the fields where Union and Confederate troops first clashed in the Battle of Lookout Mountain.
- A large and interesting variety of birds and wildlife.

It has been said that the variety of plant life in this region is comparable only to that found in areas of central China. Reflection Riding's special gift to the community is that it displays these treasures in a natural setting that is both aesthetic and accessible, with labels, printed materials, and staff available for interpretation. Visitors can travel 16 miles of roads and trails—including a 2.7-mile graveled roadway for cars.

The Riding's mission statement is "to serve the community as a 300-acre arboretum, botanical garden and historic site dedicated to the

study and conservation of native plant life that, through its unique landscape, provides opportunities for education, reflection, enjoyment, and healing for people of all ages."

Garden Development

Reflection Riding is a remarkable demonstration of conservation and creative development. It is the product of the vision, energy, perseverance, and generosity of John and Margaret Chambliss who, with advice and help from friends in the Chattanooga area and garden experts from Britain and the US, transformed a worn-out 175-acre farm. The land was bought between 1941 and 1945, and they directed development into the 1970s. Since that time it has been operated under the guidance of a community-based board of directors.

The definition of "riding" comes from 18th century landscape authority Thomas Whatley, who wrote, in part:

"...elegance is the peculiar excellence of a garden; greatness of a landscape park; simplicity of a farm...and the pleasantness of a riding...the main route should wind along in a pleasant way...the scenes as natural as possible."

As development proceeded at Reflection Riding Arboretum and Botanic Garden, Mr. Chambliss felt that the word "reflection" expressed two important things about the place: the delicate reflections of the landscape in the ponds and creek, and the human response to the spiritual and aesthetic impact of the Riding as a place in which to reflect.

John Chambliss wrote that his initial inspiration and motivation to purchase the land came from observing the remarkable project of Adolph Ochs and his brother Milton, who, between 1926 and 1932 mobilized the community to acquire and then preserve 2,700 acres on the slopes of Lookout Mountain. This land has subsequently become part of the US Park Service Chickamauga National Military Park.

When John Chambliss endowed a lecture series on the significance of landscape at the Royal Society of Arts in London in 1962, he dedicated it to three people who helped shape Reflection Riding: Gordon Cooper, a prominent landscape architect from Cleveland, Ohio, who made the first comprehensive study of the site in 1957; Dr. Vaughn Cornish, a British geographer and writer whom Chambliss cited as giving him his first and greatest inspiration as to the significance of scenery; and Bradford Williams, Boston landscape architect and longtime editor of *Landscape Architecture* magazine.

North Carolinian Frank Sauter brought in hemlock, spruce, mountain rhododendron, and azaleas from a nursery near Linville to enrich the plant life on the lower slopes as well as two cabins from the Cherokee area, which were reassembled to offer visitors an opportunity to learn about the early dwellings of both Native American and early settlers. Also working at this time was Ellis Bishop, whom Mr. Chambliss described as an "artist with a bulldozer." Together, they did most of the road planning, carved out the roads and trails on the side of the mountain, and dredged out three ponds.

The paths in the lower park were laid out by the Chamblisses from horseback, sometimes following old Native American trails and at other times creating new ones to open up vistas of neighboring mountains and geological features or interesting plant specimens.

Plant Selections

Among the plants featured at the Riding are: witch hazel, cornelian cherries, wild geranium, blue phlox, fire pinks, blue-eyed Marys, native azaleas, fields of summer wildflowers, and the vibrant fall color of the leaves of maples, sourwoods, hickories, yellow poplars, and purple ironweed. The early wildflower colonies were planted by Mrs. Chambliss and Marie Humphreys, many coming from seed from local gardens. The Humphreys were close friends of the Chamblisses. Mr. Humphreys assisted with the purchase of Sunset Rock Farm and served as president of the board from 1956-1973. Marie served as general manager for years after the death of Mr. Chambliss in 1972. Non-native plants were also introduced in the early years. The most notable are the dawn redwoods at the upper pond, unusual deciduous conifers rediscovered in central China by botanists in the 1940s and reintroduced to cultivation by the Arnold Arboretum at Harvard.

Garden Interpretation

Because the Chamblisses were very sensitive to the relationship of the plants to the people who lived in or passed through this area years ago, they used rustic signs to tell of plant uses and folklore as well as to point out interesting aspects of geography, geology, or historical events. In 1967 the Garden Club of America awarded them the Margaret Douglas Medal for Conservation Education for this effort. It continues today, with both carved and painted wooden signs and hand-written and illustrated booklets for featured gardens such as the Philp Ericaceous Garden.

Garden Maturity

As the garden has grown its needs have changed. In 1982, the board of directors commissioned Thomas Kain, a landscape architect from upper New York state, to study and evaluate the Riding to prepare a master plan for preservation and development. Under this plan, the board established priorities for the 1980s: evaluation and maintenance of trees, extensive plantings of new trees and shrubs, the first phase of trail network expansion, construction of an irrigation system, a screened pavilion, a propagation greenhouse, and a computerized inventory of plant life. Highlights of the 1990s were the acquisition of Cummings Bottom, the development of an ericaceous garden, expansion of propagation, and acquisition of Humphreys House. This latter building was the site of the luncheon stop on Friday, May 2. The **Philp Ericaceous Garden** is a memorial to late Chattanooga civic leader Robert Philp. It contains all the evergreen rhododendrons and 14 of the 16 azalea species that are native to the eastern US. Mountain laurel, hollies, hemlock, ferns, and wildflowers grow in this area. It is supported by the Philp family, the Friends of Reflection Riding, and members of the Tennessee Valley Chapter of the ARS and the Azalea Society of America.

The greenhouse complex has been expanded and improved to meet the growing demand for native plants that have been propagated, not dug from the wild. More than 200 species of wildflowers, shrubs, and native trees are propagated annually for two public sales and for adding to the Riding's plant collections. Lists of available plants and descriptions and advice for planting and care are available at the spring and fall sales. The spring Wildflower Festival offers many workshops and guided wildflower walks.

In 1997 the Garden Club of America selected Reflection Riding for inclusion in its archives of notable American Gardens in the Smithsonian Institution. In early 2003, it received certification as a Level 4 Arboretum.

David Hopkins has been executive director at Reflection Riding since 2001, but he has served on its board of directors from 1987-1995. He is only the second executive director in 45 years. He has a well-known passion for native plants and is also an active partner in Hopkins Surveying Group, Inc. of Chattanooga.

American Society for Horticultural Science Best Slide Category Award

Congratulations are in order! The CD program "Selecting and Growing Azaleas" won the national award given by the American Society for Horticultural Science (ASHS) in the slide set category. Only one winner is selected in each category, so this is indeed a major honor. There are seven categories in all, and the CD set is also in competition for the Society's annual award. All category winners will be displayed at the Century Celebration Party of the ASHS in October 2003, to be held in Providence, Rhode Island.

The CD is set up as a PowerPoint presentation for viewing of the slide set. Credit goes to for Oconee Chapter members and authors **Frank Bryan, Albert Penland, James Thornton, Dr. Gary Wade** (member and professor and extension horticulturist at the Department of Horticulture, University of Georgia College of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences), and to chapter members who contributed slides and critiqued the several drafts of the text and arrangement of the material. Frank Bryan had a demonstration copy of this product set up in the registration area at the Chattanooga convention.