

Azaleaphile: Margie Jenkins

First Lady of Louisiana Nurseries

Robert (Buddy) Lee

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Bryant and Margie started their nursery business around 1965 with a planting of wax ligustrum in the field. They were dairy farmers at the time, also growing watermelons as a cash crop. The ligustrum crop turned a good profit; and, with some of the money they purchased azalea liners to grow in the field. Bryant fertilized the azalea crop as he would have fertilized a corn crop and killed every one of them. In the late 1960s, they started a small container yard on land about 3 miles from their home. Margie was mainly in charge of this. In 1974 they were involved in building a new home on the site of the old home, which they had moved. Margie and Bryant were doing a lot of the work on their new home by themselves and had two ladies working in the nursery. The two ladies lost interest in working in the nursery and, since sales were slow, Margie just turned off the water to the plants and closed the nursery. The dairy was taking care of the family. They moved in the new home in January 1976, and that summer Margie commuted to Louisiana State University and took a course in plants and designs under Dr. Neil Odenwald. After that, Margie had a clear vision of what she wanted to do with the rest of her life. In the spring of 1977 she went back to the nursery and hired six women. The goal of the nursery was to grow native, new, unusual, and old-fashioned plants for the landscape trade. Today most of the customers are landscape contractors. When Bryant was in the final stages of cancer, the nursery was put into a limited liability company (LLC), of which Margie is the manager. She was 82 on her birthday in September and has no intention of retiring.

There is always an air of excitement at Jenkins Farm and Nursery located just east of Amite, Louisiana. Early in the morning, landscape contractors, retail nursery buyers, and numerous types of "plant people" wait for the gates to open. Seldom late, Margie Jenkins arrives and greets each person with a "Good morning," a smile, and an occasional hug; then she opens the gates. Another busy and exciting day has just begun at a place that most people have come to know lovingly as Miss Margie's Nursery. Margie Jenkins, along with four of her children, Margie Ann, Tim, Jeff and Mark, own a family nursery cooperative that is highly respected in the nursery industry. Quality plants, knowledge of plants, and friendly individual care of each customer seem to be the key components of this unique business. A personal tour of the nursery by Miss Margie in her golf cart or in her car can be most enjoyable and educational as well.

Margie Jenkins is a charter member of the Louisiana Chapter of the Azalea Society of America, which was founded in 1982. When most nursery operators in the 1970s were content with growing just a few of the "tried and true" cultivars of azaleas, Margie was actively growing and testing many different groups of azaleas. Although she has many "favorite" azaleas, she will admit that her all around favorite group is the Robin Hill hybrids. Some of her favorite deciduous azaleas are from a cross that she made in the early 1980s between *Rhododendron canescens* and *R. pericylmenoides*. These

seedlings, now approximately six to eight feet tall, have flower colors ranging from dark pink to lavender pink. Recently, Margie has rooted cuttings from these selections and hopes to have plants available in the near future. One plant that Margie has named is 'Tchefuncte', a beautiful light pink strap petal form of *R. canescens* that Margie named after the creek that winds through her property. Although she loves azaleas, Margie collects and grows a broad spectrum of plant species. She is well known for her knowledge of native plants and is very active in numerous native plant societies.

Margie Jenkins is very active in numerous horticultural organizations and societies and has held or is presently holding various offices such as board of director member for the Azalea Society of America and Senator of the Louisiana Division of the American Nursery and Landscape Association. She has received many awards and achievement plaques from numerous organizations. She is a very interesting and much sought-after speaker and is active in the "politics" of the nursery industry.

One of Margie's most pleasurable pastimes is collecting, growing, and evaluating many different kinds of plants. She loves to grow plants from seed and see what variations occur. Many horticultural groups tour her nursery and are amazed with the wide diversity of the nursery stock. Margie is a generous host and serves a tasty and satisfying meal at such occasions. Everyone has an enjoyable time and usually leaves with more

plants than they can carry.

If you ever go with Margie on a tour of nurseries, botanical gardens, or any horticultural event, you had better bring along your good walking shoes. Once we were on a tour of gardens in the Washington, DC, area, and it was raining heavily when the bus stopped at the next garden to be toured. Margie was the only person that started preparing to get off the bus. As she was exiting the bus, she handed me a disposable rain poncho and chuckled, "I've traveled too far not to be able to see this place. Let's go." It is always a pleasure to travel with her, as she always turns even the most negative situation into a positive one.

In March 2002, Miss Margie and I went to Callaway Gardens, located in Pine Mountain, Georgia, to attend a memorial service for Fred Galle. We decided to leave early in the morning so we would not be too rushed. However, before we had even started, we spent about an hour admiring the native azaleas that were in full bloom at her nursery. As we traveled along the way, the yellow pitcher plants (*Sarracenia alata*) were in full bloom on some burned-over land in Mississippi. We needed to drive slowly so we could admire them. A little farther down the road, just east of Wiggins, Mississippi, the buckwheat plants (*Cliftonia monophylla*), also known as titi plants, were in full bloom, so we decided to look for a unique form. We saw many other plant species along the roadside that drew our attention, so we took our time and enjoyed the ride. Margie has a long list of close friends in the nursery industry, and we visited with several of them in the Semmes, Alabama, area that day. The conver-

sation between Margie and Tom Dodd was fascinating as they reminisced about the changes that had taken place in the nursery industry over the years. Needless to say, it was late in the evening before we left southern Alabama, and we still had several hours of driving before we would arrive in Pine Mountain. However, the conversation was very lively as we discussed plants and "plant people" throughout the long drive. Margie talked about her trips out of the country where she had toured gardens and looked for new plant material. She thoroughly enjoyed seeing new places and meet-



Margie Jenkins with her *R. canescens* x *periclymenoides* seedling selection.
(Photo by Robert Lee)

ing people. She also talked about the foot-and-mouth disease that was affecting the livestock while she was in England and also about the horror and heartache she felt after the terrorist attacks while she was in Washington, DC, on September 11, 2001. It was way after midnight by the time we arrived to our destination, but the time passed so quickly. It was absolutely a wonderful trip that I will always remember.

At Margie's nursery, you will find many different types of plants, many that she has purchased from overseas sources. One order from China arrived late one evening and, as usual, Margie was still at the nursery when the boxes arrived. Since I had

some plants in the order, she called to tell me the plants had arrived. Wishfully, I was thinking that we could attend to the plants early the next morning. However, when it comes to plants, the time of day is no deterrent for Margie. Even though both of us already had had a long and busy day, Margie was more than eager to start opening the boxes and taking care of her new plants. Each new plant group that we unwrapped triggered much discussion and some searching through many of Margie's plant books for additional information on that particular species. Several hours later the plants had all

been unwrapped, separated, and watered. Listening to Margie talk and realizing just how much knowledge she has about plants is surely an inspiration to anyone involved in the horticultural industry. After we had finished taking care of the plants, I drove my truck through the main gates and onto the road, where I paused to make sure that Margie returned safely to her car after closing and locking the gates.

Another busy and exciting day was coming to a close at Jenkins Farm and Nursery. While driving away, I looked back to wave goodbye and I heard Margie say, "Enjoyed your visit, come back when you have the time." Everyone always feels welcome at Miss Margie's.

Robert (Buddy) Lee is the current president of the Azalea Society of America for 2003-2005. He has been a member of the Louisiana Chapter of the ASA since 1983, serving as president of the chapter from 1990-1992. A true promoter of the azalea, he coordinated two national conventions for the ASA, one in New Orleans (1991) and the other in Charleston, South

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ting up the basic organization and the by-laws, as did Bill. Bill assumed more and more responsibility and was national treasurer for a number of years. Nate was our first editor of *The Azalean*. That position was then assumed in 1979 by Jack Schaffer, a landscape designer with degrees from Harvard and Oxford universities.

Right from the beginning we decided to have a board of governors (BOG). [Now known as the board of directors, Ed.] Our first five were Emile Deckert—acting president, Frank White—acting vice-president, Thais Spencer (a retired lawyer and wonderful lady from Fulton, Maryland), Bob Mallet and Bill Parsons. We mostly met in the library at Brookside Gardens and sometimes at homes of members.

Our first public meeting was October 29, 1978 at Springbrook High School in Silver Spring, Maryland. There were 43 of our over 100 members present. Ryon Page was introduced as our plant-sale chairman, Rusty LaGuardia as our hospitality chairman, and George Harding to keep the slide library.

On January 3, 1979, a proposed slate for BOG for 1979 was mailed to the membership. Included were Emile Deckert, Frank White, Bill Parsons, Thais Spencer, Nate Fitts,

Judith Groomes, George Harding, Dr. Neil Campbell (a retired physician who claimed he caught “azaleaitis” from a patient, Albert Close, who was chief propagator at Glenn Dale), Alice Holland and Nancy Swell. Nancy has been active from the very beginning. She would drive from Richmond, Virginia, to Silver Spring, Maryland, just to attend board meetings. She put together the Richmond Chapter and was their first president. We were attempting to move along as fast as possible.

Our annual meeting was held at the US National Arboretum on March 25, 1979. Seventy-five members of our 140 were present. Ryon Page reported on the mart to be held in May. Nate Fitts announced that issue #2 of *The Azalean* would be out shortly. Buck Clagett was putting together a source list. The slate for BOG was accepted unanimously. When Nate’s resignation was put before the BOG, it was accepted with reluctance and Jack Schaffer was asked to take his place.

By the next year, 1980, we were able to confer charters on five chapters: Brookside Gardens, Richmond, Northern Virginia, Ben Morrison, and Robert D. Gartrell. The presidents of the chapters were automatically made members of the BOG.

In 1981 Bob Barry chaired the work for ASA to be represented at Flora Fest at the US Botanical Gardens as one of 29 plant societies. While he was working there, a big, lovely man walked through. He was in Washington, DC, with the dairyman’s association and was fascinated with the azalea display. His name was John Rochester. He and Bob talked, and the result was a new chapter in Louisiana and a friendship that lasted many years and beyond John’s death. John was the president of ASA in 1985.

I think that what pulls at my heart-strings the most is the memories of all the dear wonderful people. You know azalea people are very special. I felt that so many of the people that I worked with were my very dear friends: George Harding, Emile Deckert, Ryon Page, Bill and Thurza Parsons, Bob Barry, Nancy Swell, Jerry Goodman, Mal Clark, Gordon Severe, Roger Brown, Art Vance, Marge and Glenn Taylor, Rusty LaGuardia. It was a privilege for me to know Tony Dove, John Rochester, Frank White, Fred Galle, Don Hyatt, Charles Evans; and on and on and on. These eight years were a part of my life that I wouldn’t give up for anything. When people say, “Hey, who are you?” I say “I’m the lady that started the Azalea Society of America.”

Azaleaphile – continued

Carolina (2000). He owned and operated Savannah Spring Nursery, a wholesale plant nursery specializing in container-grown azaleas from 1973-1986. Along the way he found time to develop the multi-season-blooming *Encore™* Azaleas now marketed through Flowerwood Nursery in Loxley, Alabama. In 2000, the Louisiana Nursery and Landscape Association recognized his significant contribution to the industry by awarding him a Professional Achievement Award, presented during the Gulf States Horticultural Expo in Mobile, Alabama. He is presently active in the development and testing of new azalea varieties through Transcend Nursery.

Hybridizing Evergreen Azaleas—continued

Footnotes

1. A photograph of seedling 99-1 was on the cover of *The Azalean*. 25(3): 49.
2. See *The Azalean*. 25(3): 61 for a photograph of seedling 99-28.
3. Galle, Fred. *Azaleas*. Revised and enlarged edition. Portland: Timber Press. p. 412; on p. 408 in the first edition.
4. Galle, op.cit., p. 341.

Tijs Huisman, from The Netherlands, is a gardener of many years and is really crazy about plants. He started with a rhododendron garden 20 years ago and also hybridizes. He has been a member of the ASA since 1993 and is very active in growing azaleas. He has

a seven-acre garden with many of his own hybrids, and is testing hundreds more. In the spring of 2002, his first introduction of a new rhodo hybrid, ‘Helen Martin’, received a “Certification” at a rhododendron show in Germany, and he has many fine plants coming. Tijs has written articles for numerous publications: The Azalean, Journal-ARS, and publications of the German and Dutch Heather Society and a new Dutch magazine De Tuin Exclusive. He has also presented a number of programs in the US in the last 10 years. You can learn more about his horticultural experience by visiting his Web site <http://www.rhodoland.nl>. He is a professional teacher of German in high schools.