

Indian Azaleas at Magnolia Plantation

C. Preston Cooley—Historian, of Magnolia Plantation

On the banks of the Ashley River, fourteen miles above historic Charleston, South Carolina, lies one of the country's great horticultural treasures. It was here, in the mid-1840s, that the Rev. John Grimké Drayton began to create what has become the oldest public garden in the United States. Today, Magnolia stands as the country's last intact, large scale picturesque/romantic garden.

While age and size make the garden historically important, the real treasure is what the garden contains. Magnolia was one of the first gardens in the country to plant *Camellia japonica* outdoors on a large-scale. As a result, the garden now has the largest collection of camellias in the United States.

When spring comes another treasure of the garden explodes; the ancient splendor of colorful azaleas. In her book, *Magnolia on the Ashley*, published in the 1920s, Marie Clinton Hastie wrote about the beginnings of her grandfather's garden. She gives a very brief history of the Drayton family in Carolina and then goes on to write, "it was somewhere [in the mid 1840s] that the Azalea indica [was] introduced to Magnolia."

Years earlier a close friend of Rev. Drayton wrote a letter to *Garden and Forest* magazine in which he points out that "in 1848 he planted the first azaleas of his remarkable collection." While the letter is simply signed "S" very few people doubt the writer was none other than Professor Charles Sargent, then director of the Arnold Arboretum at Harvard University.

The number of varieties Rev. Drayton imported is astounding considering the azalea was not offered in American seed catalogs until 1814 and, even then, the plants were being grown and kept exclusively in northern greenhouses. These early plantings of azaleas at Magnolia-on-the-Ashley are significant because, as Jim Cothran and Andrew Kohr point out in Magnolia's Cultural Landscape Report, "Azalea Indica was not grown outdoors in the United States until John G. Drayton brought the plant to Magnolia in the 1840s."

These azaleas became known collectively as Southern Indian Hybrids and Fruitland Nursery in Augusta began offering them in their 1857-1858 Catalog, the original

seed or cuttings possibly coming from Magnolia Gardens. Magnolia's collection of azaleas would grow so large that it garnered both national and international attention and it became a repository for "old" azaleas. So much so that in 1921 E. H. Wilson wrote in the *Journal of the Arnold Arboretum* that "the collection is of great interest as it represents very completely the "Indian Azaleas" known to the gardens of the '40s and '50s of last century." Mr. Wilson goes on to say that the varieties growing at Magnolia have been lost from most modern gardens. Fred Galle, noted azalea expert, places the number of "Indian" azalea varieties originally imported to this country in the upper 80s. If what E. H. Wilson wrote in 1921 regarding their loss is true, can any of these varieties still exist today, even at Magnolia? Thankfully, the answer is a resounding YES!

The discovery of some of these lost azaleas starts in 2008 when Magnolia Plantation and Gardens teamed with other public gardens around the country to form the Great Gardens of America Preservation Alliance. The purpose of this new organization was to find and save historic plant material, specifically azaleas and camel-

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▲ 'Prince of Wales'

lias. J. Drayton Hastie Jr., a namesake of John G. Drayton, always believed the garden had rare plant material within its borders. The task was to find it.



▲ 'Prince of Orange'

Photo Miles Beach

In 2010, Bart Brechter, curator of gardens at Bayou Bend in Houston, came to Magnolia to study the azaleas and locate, if possible, any rare varieties. Mr. Brechter covered only a small part of the garden, but found more than 10 rare, endangered varieties.

Tom Johnson, Magnolia's Executive Director, believes that once the survey expands many more rare, possibly extinct, varieties will be rediscovered. Over its 300 year history Magnolia has stood sentinel on the Ashley River, silently witnessing the events of our shared past, all the while guarding her own. A history now being revealed which will place Magnolia once again in the national consciousness.

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Breeding for Hardiness (Continued from page 11)

Another approach is to use a variable parent, such as *kiusianum*. Here the tendency toward hardiness is less favorable in the first generation, since the hardiness parent may only have one copy of any gene that promotes hardiness. In that case, the probability that the gene is passed on to any given child plant is only 0.5. On the other hand, there is a chance

Our featured speaker was Steve Brainerd, Park Development Superintendent, City of McKinney. Steve designed the Ina Brundrett Azalea Garden and the Jonsson Color Garden, the original azalea garden at the Dallas Arboretum. Steve is a former National President of Azalea Society of America as well as a past President of the Dallas chapter of ASA. He has authored extensive articles for *'The Azalean.'* His presentation focused on the planting of azaleas for four-season color.

Following a brief business meeting, we were given a tour of the facility and garden by Mitch Andrews, director of the TJC advisory committee. His surprise to us was a private screening of one of the current shows, *Cosmic Collision*.

Vaseyi

Suzanne W. Medd, Secretary

On February 26, members met and discussed the programs for the year. Richard and Betty Becker graciously invited Vaseyi members to visit their garden in April. It was suggested that we also visit the garden of Marilyn Grist. This would allow a sneak preview of two of the premiere gardens of the convention.

On March 25, the convention planning committee met and worked out many of the final details. Bob Stelloh shared the beautiful "Appalachian Spring" T-shirt design.

A visit to Vivian Abney's East Fork Nursery was April's meeting with a picnic lunch. As usual Vivian had gift plants for all members!

On May 3rd, Vaseyi members set up their various convention areas, and prepared their gorgeous gardens; Marilyn Grist, the Collins, the Stellohs and the Bells were excited to share their work with visitors from around the country and the world. Mother Nature did not disappoint either because our chapter namesake, the native rare *R. vaseyi* was in beautiful early bloom on the Blue Ridge Parkway!

Our joint convention with ARS was a huge success. A hearty "Thank You" to so many hard working Vaseyi Chapter members!

that a favorable characteristic, such as color, will be passed on. Experience with my variety 96 (*R. kiusianum* x ('Ivan Anderson' x *R. oldhamii*)) illustrates this possibility. Some of these plants are hardy, with white, red, and lavender flowers.

Breeding efforts continue. Time will tell whether any of these ideas work out.