

Magnolia Gardens: Shaped by Many People

Herb Frazier, Charleston, South Carolina

I am the unlikely public relations and marketing manager at Magnolia Plantation and Gardens in Charleston, South Carolina. Selling a Southern garden to the press and public was not on my list of career options when I was growing up in this port city, but when I saw the White Bridge, Magnolia's iconic symbol, for the first time in November 2010, then inhaled the aroma and listened to passionate memories of these gardens, I knew this was a place for me.

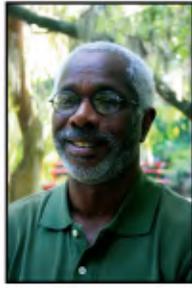
Gardens and the life that grows in them was not a childhood fantasy when I lived in the government-built projects called Ansonborough Homes at the east end of Calhoun Street. My grandmother, Mable Frazier, liked plants and cared for them outside our stoop. I have fond memories of her blooming four o'clocks. Grandmother also liked cut flowers. One of her most curious possessions was a glass flower frog at the bottom of a large glass bowl.

At that time, I had no concept of large-scale gardens, but I knew of a place called Magnolia Gardens even though I'd never seen it. At that time, social barriers might have kept me away. The picture of Magnolia's White Bridge graced the phone book's cover. That image is as much a part of my childhood memories as fireflies flickering at nightfall.

I was aware of azaleas, the flower that gives Magnolia international fame. But I didn't know of Magnolia's azaleas. When I was a boy, the ubiquitous azalea splashed color across Charleston each spring, luring tourists here to see its majesty. Now tourists come to Charleston and Magnolia year-round.

Public relations and marketing is an unlikely profession for me. In college, visions of large corporate accounts danced in my head. Instead, I wrote and edited at five Southern dailies for 32 years, traveling from Tokyo to Cape Town and never writing about gardens.

Medicine, law and crime took up much of my time. So did history. That's why Magnolia is a good fit for me. Magnolia is steeped in history. Founded in 1676, Magnolia is America's oldest garden and Charleston's first tourist attraction. The gardens were opened in 1872, but before that, rice was the staple before azaleas and camellias became centerpieces.



Frazier

I've traveled to West Africa and Barbados to write about history and their connections to Charleston. But that history comes with pain. Slavery ties Charleston and Magnolia to those regions of the world. So, as a black man I am an unlikely Magnolia marketeer considering that former Southern plantations give some black folks the hebejebes.

Why not me? Because of the reporter that still resides in me, I can't ignore that pain, and Magnolia doesn't try to hide it. Daily, Magnolia opens its gates to tell of the contributions that enslaved people made in the building of Magnolia and Lowcountry culture. That presentation is part of an award-winning "Slavery to Freedom" program centered on restored cabins that were once the homes of enslaved people. After gaining their freedom, some remained at Magnolia and some of their descendants, although they left Magnolia, have stayed close to the gardens.

After Emancipation, the cabins became home to the Leach family and other black families. Four generations of Leaches have lived and worked at Magnolia. Fifty-five year old gardener Isaac Leach speaks eloquently and passionately about growing

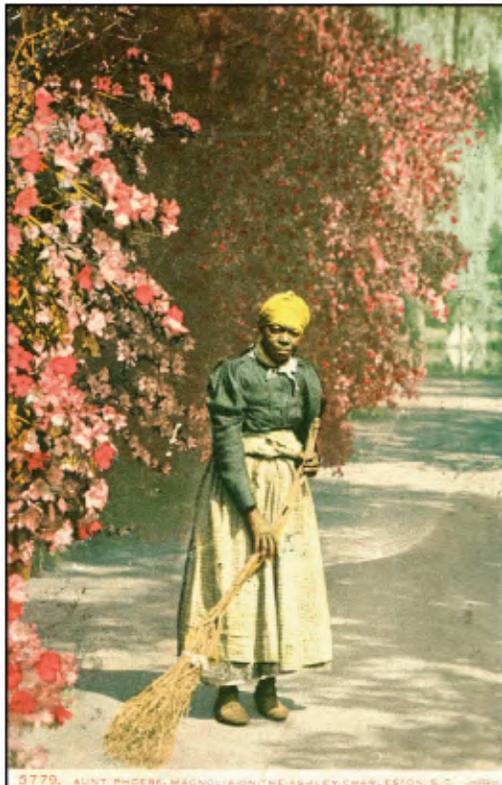
up at Magnolia during racial segregation. He adds more meaning to his words when he says he felt safer at Magnolia at a time when laws would not have protected his rights beyond the garden gates.

In the gardens are stories, yes of slavery, but also of tribute and friendship during a time of bondage. Adam Bennett was enslaved at Magnolia and stayed after he was freed to work as garden superintendent. He and other black people were more than just hands in the soil. They were technicians in the propagation and care of the plants. Historians give the Rev. John Grimké Drayton credit for opening the gardens to the public after the Civil War, but he couldn't have done it without people like Adam Bennett.

There are the stories of John Bennett, Adam Bennett's son, and Tina Gilliard and Willie Leach, three people of African descent who have camellias at Magnolia named in their honor. All have since died, but their memories live on like the plants they saw in their lifetimes. Magnolia

is perhaps the only garden in the world that has camellias named for that many black people. That's a history that I can sell.

The story of the azaleas is just as intriguing, and in the time I will spend at Magnolia it is expected to grow even larger. While the Rev. Drayton is credited with developing the azalea gardens, he didn't work alone. People of African descent were the gar-



Aunt Phoebe

deners. After the gardens opened in 1872 they worked as gatekeepers and tour guides and mingled with Magnolia's guests. If they were still alive, they'd be pleased that Magnolia is seeking older varieties of azaleas to replenish the inventory with pre-1900 plants.

Magnolia was at the forefront of a national effort two summers ago to save cold-hardy azaleas hybridized by Ben Morrison at the National Arboretum in Washington, D.C. that were slated for destruction simply because they were unnamed. Morrison was a friend of the Hastie family that owns Magnolia. The DNA of some of those plants originally came from Magnolia. Therefore, bringing those plants to Magnolia's greenhouse is tantamount to returning Magnolia's grandchildren home for future generations to enjoy.

When Charlestonians are overcome by the summer's heat, azaleas retreat. Magnolia has expanded its azalea garden to include late-blooming azaleas in a landscape designed last summer by two French horticulture students. An expanded azalea garden borders the tram road. In time, Magnolia's guests will gaze across a carpet of color at the end of a nature tram excursion.

So, like those before me, I am witnessing Magnolia's evolution in the early part of the 21st century. With care, Magnolia and its azaleas will survive three hundred more years, and at that time the job of selling its beauty would have long since passed to another likely or unlikely marketeer.

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Doin' The Charleston – Azalea Style

2014 National Convention hosted by the Rev. John Drayton Chapter



Historic Charleston, South Carolina, named the #1 travel destination in the country, is the site of the 2014 Azalea Society of America's national convention. The Doin' The Charleston – Azalea Style headquarters will be the Charleston Marriott Riverview Hotel, overlooking Brittlebank Park, the Ashley River and the Joe Riley Baseball Stadium, not far from downtown. Spend time under stately live oaks hung with Spanish moss, visit the intimate gardens of the old homes, the historic plantations and gaze at the plethora of azaleas as the Lowcountry seduces you.



Charleston Harbor

Come early and enjoy a number of optional tours on your own. Thursday, March 27th, is Glorious Gardens day on the month-long Historic Charleston Foundation's Tours of Homes & Gardens. We hope to have a block of tickets available so you can spend an afternoon touring up to 10 gardens of homes in the historic district. If enough people are interested, we will arrange for a bus for an Island Sip & See tour, visiting the historic Angel Oak on Johns Island, the Charleston Tea Plantation (America's only tea plantation), the Irvin-House Vineyards and the Firefly Distillery, home of the famous Sweet Tea Vodka, all on Wadmalaw Island. And samples are available at each!

Set up for the 2014 convention will begin at 2 PM on **Wednesday, March 26th**. Registration will be from 4 to 7 PM, and will include acceptance of plants for sale, as well as flowers and photos for the competitions. General registration includes a welcome bag of gifts, the opening reception, breakfast Friday and a Saturday morning "Southern-Style" breakfast.

Thursday, March 27th, registration and plant sales will open at 8 AM. A welcoming reception beginning at 7 PM, is an introduction with light hors d'oeuvres and 2 drink tickets per person (cash bar after that). We plan to have Michael Trouche, a native Charlestonian and well-known tour guide, introduce you to the Holy City with "A Primer on Charleston." We may also have a Gullah lady talking of their big part in Charleston's history. Just

to make sure you are really acquainted with Lowcountry traditions, we will teach you to Shag, our State Dance, and to do the Charleston! The silent auction will open that evening.

Friday, March 28th, is plantation tour day. Plant Sales and the Plant and Photo Competition will open at 8 AM. Entries for the competitions will be accepted until 1 PM. Judging will take place from 2-4 PM.



Magnolia Plantation Bridge