

# 2017 Convention Report—Fun Down on the Bayou

By Barbara Stump—Nacogdoches, Texas

Our Louisiana hosts certainly made our time “down on the bayou” fun and—of course—informative. You would expect nothing less from our hosts at the LSU AgCenter. Led by the center’s director and Louisiana Chapter president Allen Owings, our friends there specialize in hospitality as the best “companion” for learning about azaleas and their care.

Each night we were treated to receptions, wonderful local cuisine, and the opportunity to renew azalea friendships. Convention sponsors included Plant Development Services, Inc. and Bracy’s Nursery. About 90 people attended the three nights and two days of events in and around Hammond, LA. It was nice to have most attendees at the same hotel for socializing.

## Receptions March 30 and 31

We were welcomed to Hammond on both nights at the LSU AgCenter with libations and catered meals. The plant sale was also Thursday night. Many thanks to Ronnie Palmer of Azalea Hill Gardens and Nursery in Arkansas for bringing a number of Huang hybrid and other unique azaleas for us to purchase (see Figure 1). Other local companion plants were available as well. There were also gift starts of the latest dwarf Encore® Azalea, ‘Autumn Bonfire’™ and other new offerings from the Southern Living® plant collection.

Hammond’s AgCenter, located on nearly 150 acres, is one of 18 LSU AgCenters across Louisiana, and specializes in landscape horticulture, including plant selection, fertility, weed control and plant growth regulators. Scientists there evaluate over 800 ornamental plants each year in the “largest garden display in Louisiana.” The illustrated brochure with an excellent map of the grounds made it easy to find different display beds, including the Margie Y. Jenkins Azalea Garden beds. Alas, the warm winter across the South meant that most of the azaleas had already bloomed.



Photo Sherrie Rantall

## Garden Tours

Our first bus ride to historic St. Francisville, LA, brought us to an incredible tour of **Imahara’s Botanical Garden**. Begun in 2003, this 55-acre marvel is in a constant state of development by Mr. Walter Imahara. He definitely believes in shaping plants and must have an incredible tool-sharpening shop. His daughter, Wanda Chase, one of nine children and a landscape architect, guided my group. She told of how her father enjoys “poodling” all kinds of plants. This is a typical Japanese garden technique that we know as topiary (see Figure 2). Everywhere we looked there were plantings with unique forms such as a grouping of six-foot-tall standard crape myrtles, with foliage weeping from the tops. Mr. Imahara is constantly changing planting groups and shaping his plants. His azalea hillside was at least 30 feet tall and stretched for hundreds of feet, but most of the 3,000 azaleas had already bloomed. Since the land was already very hilly, he was able to create nine ponds, each named for one of his children (see Figure 3). In his spare time, he carves haiku into wooden plaques. Their wonderful video presentation described his Japanese-American family’s experience of

▲ Figure 1—Opening night plant sale. Ronnie Palmer and Joe and Donna Coleman.

▼ Figure 2—Walter Imahara with topiary holly—the three tiers symbolize Heaven, Man, and Earth.



Photo William C. Miller III





Photo William C. Miller III

▲ Figure 3—Ponds, artful landscaping, and a zig-zag bridge all meant to “slow down” the visitor to contemplate the beauty of the garden.

▲ Figure 4—View of Rosedown Plantation down the “Live Oak Alley.”



Photo William C. Miller III

internment during World War II and his subsequent dedication to and love of America. Some of his carvings reflect sayings like “It can’t be helped” or “Make the best of it.” This amazing family welcomes visitors Saturdays and

Sundays for guided tours. To learn more, visit <http://imaharasbotanicalgarden.blogspot.com/>

Next we traveled to historic **Rosedown Plantation**, now owned by Louisiana State Parks. This 25-acre

1800s site has a Southern classic “Oak Alley” of live oaks and collections of huge (14’ plus!) Southern Indica ‘Pride of Mobile’ azaleas, a series of very formal rose and perennial gardens in parterres, and a historically correct





Photo Barbara Stump

▲ Figure 5—Herbaceous parterre at Rosedown Plantation. Due to predatory wild animals, the hedging is now Yaupon holly instead of boxwood.

► Figure 6—Buddy Lee’s “new arboretum” irrigated hoop area.

reconstruction of the original in-ground “hot house” in which tropicals were kept during the winters and ladies’ teas were held (see Figures 4 and 5).

### Technical Sessions

After dinner Friday, three speakers reminded us of important aspects involved in growing azaleas and other plants. Hopefully they will contribute these as papers for future issues of *The Azalean*.

Dr. Rodrigo Valverde presented “Virus Identification in Azaleas.” His research was funded in part by the ASA Research Fund and covered viruses that cause variation in many kinds of ornamental plants.

In “Growing Disease Free Azaleas” Dr. Mark Windham from the University of Tennessee had us laughing as he







Photo Andy Whipple



Photo Barbara Stump

▲ Figure 7—Fun times at Buddy and Dixie Lee’s “Transcend Nursery.” Susan Bauer, J Jackson, and Rick Bauer do the “Second line dance” (left to right).

helped us understand that at the very least we should demand plants with white roots in nurseries. Yes, check the root ball at the bottom of the plant before you buy.

Dr. Neil Odenwald’s lecture invited us to really “see” our gardens and landscapes and to plant and care for them with design principles in mind.

### Nursery Tours

Saturday, April 1 we visited three nurseries and saw what it takes to get our favorite azaleas to market. All three are well-known to the ASA and were in the vicinity of near-by Covington, LA.

First off, we saw **Buddy Lee’s new arboretum**. He said these 60 acres have been a nursery for 100 years, but the place was in immaculate condition, with plastic cloth between long rows of many kinds of plant trials, watered by state-of-the-art irrigation (see Figure





Photo William C. Miller III

▲ Figure 8—A dear friend asked where the “dancing girls” were in *The Azalean*. Here they are with their friends.

► Figure 9—Bracy’s Nursery 150-acre growing area is zero discharge, with all water and other materials recycled on-site.

6). All of this under pines planted for cover. He uses this as an “evaluation nursery” for his new seedlings. Walking through the wide aisles between the tall pines inter-planted with heat-tolerant rhododendrons was a big treat for those of us from the South where elepidotes don’t tend to thrive. And, of course, we saw a number of deciduous azaleas being trialed there, thanks to Buddy’s long relationship with local plant guru John Thornton.

From there we went to **Transcend Nursery**, Buddy and Dixie Lee’s home place and site of more seedlings under evaluation and *many* other larger plants. We had plenty of time to see everything and enjoy Lee hospitality. They not only had gumbo for a mid-morning snack, but also Cajun music played by Mr. Ernie’s Band on their back porch, and Mardi Gras beads and cups for everyone. We even danced a “second line dance” (see Figures 7 and 8).

Then the buses went on to **Bracy’s Nursery**, owned and operated by Regina and Randy Bracy. They began in 1986 selling peach trees, now



Photo Barbara Stump



Photo Eddie Martin





grow a wide palette of plants (750 individually identified kinds), own the largest container nursery (150 acres) in Louisiana, and ship 35 semi-trucks a week to independent garden centers throughout the Southeast. Randy gave us the statistical rundown, which was mind-boggling, and then he and Regina each did a guided tour on the two buses throughout the site. They are licensed to grow a number of well-known azalea brands, including Encore® (see Figure 9).

But their hospitality didn't end there... We drove across the road to their home and were treated to a wonderful luncheon in their patio garden. This area is a perfect spot for hosting such large parties, and Buddy Lee and J Jackson took advantage of the grand environment to present ASA Distinguished Service Awards to very deserving local LA Chapter members or local people who have made incredible contributions to the ASA for years (see Awards Page for photos).

Our final stop, just down the road, was to **Jenkins Farm & Nursery**. Miss Margie described some of her current favorite azaleas, both evergreen and deciduous, and then let us wander around. Finally, we saw blooming azaleas, mainly from the Robin Hill Hybrid group, which she taught this writer about years ago. This is a very reliable group in the South, late-blooming with large flowers, developed by Robert Gartrell. Miss Margie is a truly gifted propagator and nurserywoman who will share her knowledge and tricks with anyone who shows an interest. We were also treated to another dessert courtesy of her family, and a visit from the nursery's resident China goose (see Figures 10 and 11).

## Annual Meeting

Saturday night April 1 we met in downtown Hammond at the Mezzanine Event Hall for the annual meeting and banquet—a lovely space, with great catering, libations, and a stage with excellent projection equipment. The annual meeting began with the formal announcement of the new slate of officers (see Figure 12), the award for the best article in *The Azalean*, and a

Photo Barbara Slump

▲ Figure 11—Miss Margie Jenkins' favorite azaleas.

◀ Figure 10—Buddy Lee and Miss Margie at Jenkins Farm & Nursery.





Photo Barbara Stump

▲ Figure 12—ASA officers, (l to r): treasurer Paul Beck, out-going president J Jackson, president Rick Bauer, vice-president Charlie Andrews, secretary Leslie Nanney.



Photo William C. Miller III

▲ Figure 13—Paul Beck (l) presented J Jackson (r) with a commemorative President's gavel for his service 2013-2017.

special award to J Jackson in recognition of his four years as president. Hale Booth described the Azalea Research Fund work, and webmaster David Banks and ASA treasurer Paul Beck gave a live demonstration of the beautifully upgraded Azalea Society website. Looking forward, Allen Owings and Gerald Klingaman announced next year's convention venue will be in Little Rock, AR, April 5-7, 2018. (Watch for more information coming in the fall and winter issues of *The Azalean*.) The evening ended with illusionist and psychic David Himelrick astounding a few members by "reading their minds."

### Special Thanks

Convention organizer Allen Owings gave me the following list of people to recognize, without whom the convention would not have been so fun and educational. His name should be at the top.

LSU AgCenter Volunteers: Jason Stagg, Yan Chen, Gina Hebert, Paul Wilson, Ed Bush

Nursery Hosts: Margie Jenkins, Jenkins Farm & Nursery; Randall and Regina Bracy, Bracy's Nursery; Buddy and Dixie Lee - nursery and home visit hosts

Entertainment: David Himelrick

Plant Sales: Ronnie Palmer, LSU AgCenter, Buddy Lee, Plant Development Services Inc.

All staff at the LSU AgCenter Hammond Research Station Convention Tote Bag: Plant Development Services, Inc.

Speakers: Neil Odenwald, Rodrigo Valverde, and Mark Windham

Tour Hosts: Walter Imahara and Family, Trish Aleshire (Rosedown Plantation)



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