2019 Convention Preview

History, Azaleas, and Sweet Tea

By Tom Johnson—Charleston, South Carolina

The Rev. John Drayton Azalea Chapter of the Azalea Society of America and Magnolia Plantation and Gardens’ will host the society’s 2019 convention Thursday to Saturday, March 14-16, 2019, in Summerville, South Carolina. [Photo 1] The registration form is printed on the inside cover of this issue of The Azalean and is available at the ASA website, www.azaleas.org.

Themed “History, Azaleas, and Sweet Tea,” the conference is appropriately being held in Summerville, which is certified as an ASA Azalea City and known as the home of “sweet tea.”

Convention speakers will include Dr. John Nelson, chief curator at the A.C. Moore Herbarium, Department of Biological Sciences at the University of South Carolina; Sidney Frazier, Middleton Place’s vice-president of horticulture; native azalea expert Ernest Koone; and historic interpreters Dontavius Williams and Kirk Brown.

Planners selected Summerville as the convention site because of the town’s unique history. The first settlement in Summerville began following the Revolutionary War. In 1785, it was referred to as the Pineland Village. Plantation owners flocked to Summerville to escape insects and swamp fever. By 1847, Summerville was incorporated. In that year, the town passed a law against cutting down large trees.

Today, the motto on the town’s official seal reads: “Sacra Pinus Esto (The Pine is Sacred).”

In this historic town, the Wyndham Garden Hotel and the Hampton Inn, located across the street from one another, have been selected as sites for this year’s convention. Room rates, not including taxes, are $129 at the Wyndham and $139 at the Hampton. Rooms are limited so book early.

Thursday, March 14 Welcome and Plant Sale

Check-in on Thursday will be in the Wyndham Hotel’s lobby where you will receive a convention bag filled with goodies, agendas, and badges. Since Wyndham’s banquet hall can seat 150 people, most activities will be held there. The azalea and plant sale will be held across the street at the Hampton.

The fun starts Thursday night at the welcome reception where you can visit with old friends, make new ones, and receive information on the upcoming tours and educational programs. The plant sale will be open for a limited time (5 p.m.- 9 p.m.), so arrive early to get those rare azaleas and other plants before they go home with someone else.

Friday, March 15 Tours and Speakers

Friday’s breakfast, catered by Beyond Expectations, will include Belgian waffles with assorted toppings, pecan-smoked bacon, fresh seasonal fruit, stone-ground cheddar-cheese grits, biscuits, coffee, and juices. Buses will load at 8:00 a.m., so breakfast early.

Buses load at 8:00 a.m. Friday for the tours. The adventure starts at Middleton Place, home of America’s oldest formal gardens. [Photo 2] After touring Middleton, lunch will be served there. Sidney Frazier, Middleton’s vice-president of

V Photo 1—Magnolia Plantation Home surrounded by azaleas.

V Photo 2—Formal Garden Camellia Walk at Middleton Place.
horticulture, will talk about the gardens.

Mepkin Abbey, a former plantation with its beautiful gardens, is the next stop. Mepkin Abbey is now an active Roman Catholic monastery. The order was established in 1949. The monks live by the work of their hands, supporting the poor and devoting their lives to unceasing prayer, spiritual study, work, and hospitality. The grounds include the Nancy Bryan Luce Gardens, as well as a gift shop with dried mushrooms and garden compost from the Abbey’s farm; and candies, preserves, and creamed honey from other Trappist abbeys.

Following the abbey, we will return to the hotels for dinner on your own. Don’t stray too far or you will miss learning little known facts about Charleston’s intriguing history. The evening will start with Kirk Brown’s portrayal of Frederick Law Olmstead, the father of American landscape architecture. In 1853, Olmstead traveled through the south and Charleston and then he wrote about rice production. In 1906, the Olmstead Brothers’ firm designed Charleston’s Hampton Park.

The history lesson will continue with the story of a slave boy named Adam. Dontavius Williams will present “The Chronicles of Adam” in a riveting interpretation. Although based on a real person, this story is comprised of various accounts, historical facts, and life lessons for people of any age.

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**Saturday, March 16**

**Tours, Banquet, Annual Meeting**

Rise early on Saturday for another Beyond Expectations breakfast of farmhouse frittatta (similar to an omelette or quiche) with bacon and sausages, fresh seasonal fruit, stone-ground cheddar-cheese grits, biscuits, coffee and juices.

Buses load at 8:00 a.m. Saturday for the Charleston Tea Plantation on Wadmalaw Island. William Barclay Hall started the tea plantation with Camellia sinensis plants originally grown by Dr. Charles Shepard at his Pinehurst Tea Plantation in Summerville. After his death in 1915 that plantation closed, and Dr. Shepard’s plants grew wild for 40 years. In 1963 a 127-acre potato farm on Wadmalaw Island, used as an experimental farm, included transplants of Shepard’s plants from Pinehurst. In 1987, Hall, a third-generation tea taster with formal training during a four-year tea apprenticeship in London, England, purchased the land and converted the research farm to a commercial tea producing operation. Tea plantation guides will discuss how plants are grown and harvested.

Lunch will be served at Magnolia Plantation, America’s oldest romantic-style garden. During lunch, Ernest Koone will discuss the history of native azaleas. After lunch roam Magnolia’s gardens on your own or join an organized tour led by a member of Magnolia’s garden staff. Return to the hotel for the farewell banquet. The menu includes Caesar salad, Charleston chicken, oven-roasted red bliss potatoes, haricot verts (green beans) or Southern-style green beans, rolls and butter.
Dr. John Nelson, chief curator at the A.C. Moore Herbarium, Department of Biological Sciences at the University of South Carolina, will be the banquet speaker. The herbarium in Columbia, SC, contains more than 130,000 dried plant specimens, primarily from the southeastern United States. Established more than 100 years ago, the herbarium contains a diverse collection of vascular and nonvascular plants.

The 2019 Annual ASA Meeting will follow the banquet.

Notes:

Tom Johnson is a lifelong horticulturist with impressive garden design project skills as well:
• Growing up on a middle-Georgia truck farm, in high school he oversaw the redesign of downtown Perry, Georgia, winning a prestigious national award.
• Enlisted by President Jimmy Carter in 1985-1995 to oversee the building of the gardens at the Carter Presidential Library in Atlanta and selected for the design team of the library’s Evan Allen III Pavilion and the Cecil B. Day Chapel. While at the Carter Center Gardens, Tom apprenticed for five years under world-renowned Japanese architect Kinsako Nakane.
• Service as the national horticulturist with the American Camellia Society national headquarters at the Massee Lane Gardens.

While at Massee Lane, John Drayton Hastie Jr., one of the owners of Magnolia Plantation and Gardens in Charleston, heard Tom speak of his affection for romantic-style gardens. Hastie lured Tom to Magnolia to restore the gardens at America’s oldest romantic-style garden. The project launched Tom on a worldwide search for azalea and camellia varieties that predate the 1900s. It also spurred him to share his gardening expertise with colleagues in Belgium, France, Barbados, and Cuba.

Tom describes Magnolia as a grand old lady. “My job is to shine her shoes, dress her in some new robes, and get her ready for the thousands of suitors that come calling each year.”