

## **Jasper Texas—First New ASA Azalea City in 2018** *Brent Meaux and Robert Thau—Jasper, Texas*

Jasper Texas is a small town in the pineywoods of east Texas known as the “Jewel of the Forest.” Rolling hills, native woodland trails, Lake Sam Rayburn, Toledo Bend Lake, Martin Dies Jr. State Park, and Sandy Creek all bring a sense of the way life used to be in our community.

For many years, downtown Jasper has hosted the annual Azalea Festival on the courthouse square. March 17, 2018 was our 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary hosting the event, which includes public Azalea Trails throughout the city’s residential area. The trails attract visitors from surrounding areas to view a massive show of azaleas in yard after yard, primarily many different varieties of Formosa azaleas.

Jasper is already the Butterfly Capital of Texas centered on the Monarch migration. This focus includes our Butterfly Watch Stations and Butterfly House within the Jasper Arboretum along the Sandy Creek Park and Nature Trail.

In the past year we’ve led a grassroots movement to coordinate the festival, parks, and community in an awareness campaign to make Jasper, Texas, an ASA Azalea City. This movement started about a year ago as we began working on the project to obtain material needed to qualify for this national ASA recognition. We gathered all the information and Robert presented it to Buddy Lee, the chairman of the Azalea City Program. Within a month, Buddy Lee called with approval for Jasper to be a nationally recognized ASA Azalea City.

Mayor Gary Gatlin, the Chamber of Commerce, and City Manager Denise Kelley were all notified and continue to support the newly recognized designation and promoted this year’s 30<sup>th</sup> Azalea Festival as the platform for recognizing Jasper, Texas, as an official Azalea City. [Photo 1.]

The main goal and primary focus for the Azalea City designation is to expose the public to vast numbers of azaleas that the public may not know or recognize. In addition to adding members in Jasper within the ASA’s Texas Chapter, the Azalea City designation will attract new members from our region that will volunteer and collaborate with our Jasper Master Gardeners and Jasper Master Naturalists in beautification projects downtown and community-wide for generations to enjoy. [Photo 2.]

The City of Jasper has a very bright azalea future consisting of “reds, whites, pinks, purples,” and no telling what other colors await the annual pilgrimage to Texas’s newest Azalea City.

Brent Meaux is a Jasper Master Gardener and a State Farm agent. He is Jasper’s Downtown Revitalization Project Manager, and past chair of the Jasper Master Gardeners and Jasper Lakes Area Chamber of Commerce.

Robert Thau is Texas Chapter President and ASA Membership Chairman. He is an expert propagator of azaleas, will travel many miles to collect more, and is a strong supporter of the ASA Legacy Project. Robert is always eager to teach groups of plant lovers about azaleas and hold workshops on azaleas. His garden is open to the public, garden clubs, and Master gardeners during the blooming season to introduce them to the hundreds of cultivars he has growing.