

The Winds of August and September

A Report by Members of the Louisiana Chapter

[Thanks to Bill Bode for reporting on his survey for this article and to Buddy Lee for the news from Zemurray Gardens in his Transcend Nursery. The information is current as of February 14 and 19, 2006, respectively, Ed.]

The Louisiana Chapter has hosted three national ASA conventions, so many of you have visited our gardens, both public and private. This report is a compilation of interviews with those owners, keepers, and caretakers who faced the storms, Katrina and Rita, and their assessment of damage to their gardens. Most of the Louisiana Chapter's members live in the central Gulf South area, which extends from Alabama to Texas. These storms caused a terrible loss of life; villages, towns, and cities were destroyed; and hundreds of thousands of homes and gardens were lost. All of this has been on your radio or television, and in your newspapers.—But what happened to azaleas? How did they fare in such adversity?

Hurricane Katrina in August and Hurricane Rita in September were considered Category III storms on the Safir-Simpson Scale as they crossed the coastline; however, the storm surges generated by them were in no way equal. Katrina's surge in some areas was calculated to be 35 feet, while Rita's was estimated at 9-13 feet. Katrina had an abnormally large diameter, so that some members were subjected to hurricane force winds for as long as 7 hours.

The material for this article was gained by interview by telephone, in person, or by e-mail from members of the chapter, and their comments are noted. Bill Bode did the bulk of the data collection and reporting. The survey was based on questions about the amount of damage sustained from four factors:

1. Either line or cyclone winds.
2. Falling or flying objects.
3. Tidal surge.
4. Fresh water flooding or standing water.

Hurricane Katrina Damage

The following extract is from a member on the east side (wet side) of Hurricane Katrina.

Bellingrath Gardens. Located near Theodore, Alabama, this was one of the sites visited on the tours

during the 1999 national ASA meeting in Mobile, Alabama. Dr. William Barrick is the director and kindly furnished this information by phone. This garden has been one of the major attractions on the Gulf Coast for many years for both Gulf Coast residents and visitors. It probably has more visitors than any private garden from Pensacola, Florida, to Beaumont, Texas. Some of you will remember the magnificent live oaks as well as our beloved azaleas. Dr. Barrick told me that while the oaks escaped major damage, they do show the effect of 100+ mph winds. Mobile, several miles to the east of

Bellingrath Gardens, experienced major flooding. Dr. Barrick reported no major standing water or tidal surge, and lastly he told me "the azaleas fared well and some are even in bloom today." To which I said, "Amen."

The following extracts are from members living on the west (dry side) of Katrina.

Dr. John Thornton's **Push-etappa Nursery** is located on Louisiana Highway 1072, in Washington Parish, and near the village of Pine, Louisiana. This garden suffered major damage overall. However, the azaleas planted in the ground, including those of the Glenn Dale distribution,

were not damaged to any great extent by the line winds. John's neighbor has an anemometer and told John that he recorded sustained winds of 100+ mph for a period of 4 hours. The main damage done to this nursery was caused by falling oak trees and flying branches. Oaks have such large crowns that they frequently damage structures, pumps, pipes, electric and communication lines. Since John was unable to secure an adequate generator, all chance of irrigation was lost. John lost electric power and communications, since the cell phone towers were inoperable. The moderate drought that followed added to his loss.

Thomas Milner III lives as he claims "in the dead center of Harrison County, Mississippi" and was very close to the "eye" of Katrina. He was subjected to hurricane force



At Zemurray Gardens huge pines are down, but sculpture is still intact. (Photo by Buddy Lee)

winds for about 8 hours. Thom's place is heavily timbered with pines, or at least it was. He estimates that 1000 trees were lost to the storm, and a goodly number fell on seedling and propagating areas, resulting in severe losses so that even now he is unable to get to parts of his nursery because of the amount of fallen timber yet to be removed. Additional losses occurred due to drought: Even though he had adequate generators to run the irrigation system, he ran out of fuel and had to cut his way out to replenish it. When he got to the fuel source no fuel was available. Some days a guy can't lay up a dime! He voiced his concern for the future of the growing areas that encountered the tidal surge because of the residual salinity and the depositing of other toxic substances. His nursery was not subjected to this.

Margie Y. Jenkins Nursery and Farm is located just off Louisiana Highway 16 one mile west of the Tangipohoa-Washington Parish line. Damage was moderate in the nursery area, but little if any in the propagating and seedling areas. This required some extended effort by the Jenkins family, and that exploit will be told a little later on. Margie experienced the same weather conditions as did John Thornton. The day after Katrina went elsewhere Margie found that the generators in place were not of sufficient size to operate the full irrigation system to provide adequate water for the time she knew the power would be off. She began a search for supplementary generators, and found that none were available in the immediate area, nor were any in Baton Rouge, Alexandria, or Lafayette, Louisiana. After several misadventures one of sufficient size was found in Houston, Texas. And so a Ford-350 pickup with trailer rode out to save the day. All's well that ends well, even though it takes a journey of a 1000 miles to make it happen.

Folsom Nursery, owned by Ms. Pat Newman, is located on Louisiana Highway 40 east of the village of Folsom in St. Tammany Parish, Louisiana. It is a moderate size wholesale nursery that takes pride in the number of varieties of azaleas it has for sale. The storm damage experienced here is a different story. It is a well-known fact that tropical storms spawn lots of tornadoes; Katrina did just that and saved one for Folsom Nursery. The damage caused by that one was severe to catastrophic to the "can yard" which was about 6 acres in size and covered by pines 60-75 feet tall. The day I visited, bulldozers were finishing the removal of all those trees and the lost azaleas.

David Boyd Jr. is a research entomologist at the **USDA Southern Agricultural Center in Poplarville, Mississippi**. His area of interest is in nursery production of azaleas. Reports he has received from local growers indicated "the nurseries fared well" and that no reports of "surge water" had been received.



Transcend Nursery propagation yard survives, despite a number of pines down around it. (Photo by Buddy Lee)

Zemurray Gardens is located approximately 60 miles north-northwest of New Orleans. This 120-acre garden, including the 20-acre Mirror Lake, was begun in 1928 by owner Sam Zemurray, a wealthy banana tycoon. The land is presently owned and maintained by the Reimer/Schneider family and is managed by Bennett & Peters, Inc., Forestry Consultants. During the 1991 national ASA convention, this garden was one of the stops on the day tour of the area north of Lake Pontchartrain. The garden is open to the public during the spring azalea bloom, and has become an annual destination for many locals and tourists alike.

Hurricane Katrina was not kind to this area of south-east Louisiana, and Zemurray Gardens sustained significant damage. According to Ken Robbins, who works for the management company, about 80 percent of the large pine trees (approximately 1000 trees) that stood so stately throughout the gardens were blown down or snapped in two. As the eye of the storm passed to the east, sustained winds estimated at 85 to 95 mph, with much higher gusts, roared through the gardens for several hours. Amazingly, all of the imported European statues were left undamaged. The fallen and damaged trees have been removed, and most of the roads in the gardens are now accessible. There is extensive damage to the azaleas from the fallen trees; however, a large portion of the azaleas should survive and do quite well in the future. The owners and the management company are now in the process of evaluating the future direction of the garden. While walking down the trails, it is heartbreaking to see the damage that has occurred. Even with the damage from this catastrophic storm, somehow one can still feel the special magic of this magnificent place. Beyond the uprooted trees and damaged azaleas, I can envision, and hope for, a bright future for Louisiana's best kept secret garden, Zemurray Gardens.

Transcend Nursery, owned by Buddy Lee, had approximately 60 trees blown down or damaged so significantly that they had to be removed. Fortunately, the irrigation system was not that badly damaged, and plants were

watered with power supplied by a gas generator. The extreme heat and drought that followed the storm for several weeks severely stressed and killed many older, established azaleas in the area. Cleanup is still underway, with mostly removal of small debris from the flowerbeds.

Hurricane Rita Damage

Robert Turley, Calcasieu Agricultural Center, Lake Charles, Calcasieu Parish, Louisiana. Wind damage to azaleas planted in the ground was minimal; however, damage was severe to those that were subjected to tree fall and flying debris. Calcasieu Parish is in the southwest tip of Louisiana, and has an extended shoreline—both Gulf Coast and Mississippi River—and therefore is subject to tidal surges on two sides resulting in severe flooding. The heavily treed Allen, Beauregard, and Vernon parishes surrounding Calcasieu, all north and east of Lake Charles, suffered extensive damage.

Hodges Gardens is located on US Highway 171 in Sabine Parish, between Many and Leesville, Louisiana. This area is well known to fishermen (Toledo Bend Lake

and soldiers (Ft. Polk) and is heavily treed with second-growth pine and various oaks. Lynn Musick is the director and was not available when I called, but a spokesperson told me that while the garden had sustained considerable damage, “the garden is open and looking forward to the spring.”

Conclusions

1. Azaleas are tough and resilient.
2. They do not like salt-water baths.
3. They are very tolerant of pine trees, but not when hurricane winds are in the neighborhood.

Bill Bode has been president of the Louisiana Chapter 1995-1996 and 2005-2006 and was president of the Men's Garden Club of Baton Rouge from 1969-1970. He was president of the ASA from 1999 to 2001. He retired from a career as a hospital representative of the pharmaceutical industry (Merrell-Dow) in 1985. Buddy Lee is currently president of the ASA.

New Members

The following members joined the Society as of March 31, 2006.

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