

What is an Azalea Trail?

Azalea trails have been a feature of several Southern cities for a long time. Just as with the ASA, these events promote the use of azaleas in the landscape and highlight gardens, both public and private, that have large and/or unique displays. Typically there are other educational or fun events scheduled during the peak azalea bloom period. The more events, the more promotional effort spent in informing the public about these events, the more tourists visit, the greater is the economic impact for the host communities. For example, Nacogdoches Convention and Visitors Bureau (CVB) did an economic impact analysis of the 2005 Nacogdoches Azalea Trail, coming to the conclusion that 5,000 people visited Nacogdoches during the Azalea Trail, resulting in \$425,000 in direct spending locally. Much of this spending was generated by the CVB's aggressive marketing of the Azalea Trail to tour group operators who scheduled many overnight stays in local hotels. Of course, gardeners must plant their yards and public gardens full of azaleas so the visitors have plenty to see. So, an Azalea Trail is like a garden; it needs constant tending, nurturing, and renewal.

As you ASA members make your way to our convention in East Texas, you may want to include the following Azalea Trails and associated events along your route. This list is by no means comprehensive. If you know of others, write about them and send your articles to the Editor of *The Azalean* for future publication.

Mobile, Alabama. The ASA convention visited this city filled with azaleas in 1999. There has been an Azalea Trail here for 75 years, with many streets lined with the rich colors of Southern Indicas and Formosa azaleas. According to Bill Finch, Environmental Editor for the *Mobile Register*, Mobile was one of a circuit of cities in the 1920s to which people would drive to see large displays of azaleas. Cities as far apart as Charleston, South Carolina; Tallahassee, Florida; and Shreveport, Louisiana; were major stops on "The Trail." Mobile's 35-mile Azalea Trail winds through areas of beautiful homes and gardens in town during the end of March-early April, and includes Bellingrath Gardens' 65 acres and Mobile Botanic Gardens' New Rhododendron and Azalea Garden. In addition, from March 21-25, 2007, the Providence Foundation Festival of Flowers, also held in Mobile, carries on the tradition of encouraging people to create beautiful gardens.

Houston, Texas. The River Oaks Garden Club, founded in 1927, has been organizing their Azalea Trail for 70 years. The private home tours often include homes that have been lavishly decorated for the event; some of the gardens display the work of landscape architects. The Bayou Bend Gardens are unique in that they have been maintained to the period 1940-1950, and keep to the plant palette of the original landscape designer for philanthropist Ima Hogg, who donated her home and grounds to the River Oaks Garden Club. The house is also a well-known American decorative arts museum. Being in Zone 9, the dates are early: March 2-4, 2007; 11:00 a.m.-6:00 p.m. Tickets \$5-\$20 for tours of five private homes and gardens, the River Oaks Garden Club Forum of Civics Building and Gardens, and the Bayou Bend Gardens-Philadelphia Hall & Jones Visitor Center.

Tyler, Texas. Azaleas were first tested in Tyler in 1929 by nurseryman Maurice Shamburger. The test garden succeeded, and he

convinced Mrs. Sara Butler of the *Tyler Courier Times* Telegraph of the beautification potential of azaleas. Her garden inspired the planting of thousands of azaleas planted in the older sections of Tyler. In 1960 the Tyler Chamber of Commerce marked a five-mile trail by 60 homes with mature azaleas. By 2004, the extended eight-mile Tyler Azalea Trail included 150 homes and attracted 100,000 visitors. There are a number of events associated with the Trail, including 24 costumed Azalea Belles who greet visitors at the homes, pose for pictures, and give out information year-round. 2007 dates: March 16-April 1, 2007.

Nacogdoches, Texas. The first Azalea Trail was organized in 2000 by the Nacogdoches CVB, in association with its board and local citizens. The 24 miles of trails wind through the four historic districts in town that have mature azaleas. Special events during the three-week season are the plant sale sponsored by local garden clubs and nurseries, the "Art of Floral Design" (with azaleas) exhibition, and an annual Azalea Symposium, sponsored by the SFA Mast Arboretum. The CVB schedules many special tours of the Ruby M. Mize Azalea Garden and other sites of interest in Nacogdoches, with volunteer "Tejas Greeters" as "Step-on Guides" who lead the tours. 2007 dates: March 17-31. [Note: *Tejas* means "all who are friends" in the Caddo language spoken by the Native Americans who lived in the region of New Spain that eventually became Texas; it is still the Spanish name of Texas, Ed.]

Contact Information

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<http://www.riveroaksgardenclub.org/AzaleaTrail.cfm>

Mobile Botanical Gardens
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