

Lagniappe

Aaron Cook—Valdese, North Carolina

It is 3:43 a.m. Tuesday morning according to the clock in the bottom right-hand corner of my computer screen. I just returned from the Nacogdoches ASA convention. The plants have been unloaded from the car, and dirty clothes are piled on the laundry room floor.

I am checking my e-mail to make sure my boss got the message that she has to cover my eight o'clock Applied Plant Science class. She has responded to my earlier e-mail and class is covered, so I can relax and get a little sleep before my afternoon classes. Now that I have done all the things I needed to do I am wide awake. Since I am up and the house is quiet I can take a few moments to reflect on the events of the last few days.

The first question that pops into my head is: "Why do I always try to attend the annual convention?" Is it the gardens? Is it the people? Actually it's both. It's also about seeing the immense pride and joy our members get from showing their gardens and local area.

If you have never been to a national ASA convention, you don't know what you're missing. Have you ever traveled alone to a convention and found it difficult to fit in? My first Human Anatomy and Physiology Society convention was like that. I shared an interest with these people, but I just didn't seem to fit in.

During the years, I have belonged to several societies and attended quite a few conferences and conventions. None have been as completely satisfying as a national ASA convention. From the first one I attended to this one, I have always had a wonderful time.

The ASA family has always made me feel welcome and at ease. The Nacogdoches convention was no exception. It was another great family reunion for those of us who never miss this opportunity to get together. We toured great gardens, made new friends, caught up on what's been going on since the last convention, and ate a lot of good food. Kudos and thanks to **Barbara Stump**, **Barbara Wagner**, and all the other volunteers for a wonderful convention.

I began this article before leaving for Texas and initially titled it "Before and After." I was planning to write about how we use convention travel to visit each other's gardens. However, after this convention, only one word can sum up this experience—lagniappe. Lagniappe is a Southern Louisiana term pronounced lahn-yap, or occasionally lan-yap, and it means "a little something extra; a gift or show of appreciation."

My personal Southern Louisiana lagniappe started to take shape on the tour bus Saturday as we were driving through the private gardens of Nacogdoches. I was talking to **John Thornton** about some of his elepidote rhododendron hybrids. I had read his article about breeding rhododendrons for the Gulf Coast and was curious about how the plants were doing after the hurricane.

I asked John, "When is the best time to see them in bloom?" He stated in his straightforward way: "They are in bloom now. Why don't you come by on your way back home?"

Hmmmm, I thought. Should I extend my trip and make a pass through Southern Louisiana? I had promised to visit **Margie Jenkins** for several years, and I would like to see **Buddy Lee's** operation as well.

Without much input from me, the plan was quickly formulated before the banquet and meeting were over Saturday night. I would drive to Amite, Louisiana, (pronounced A-meet) on Sunday and spend the night at Margie's, visiting her nursery Monday morning. In the afternoon, I would visit Buddy and John.

After the business meeting Sunday, I corralled **Tom Milner** on the hotel steps to consult his atlas and plan my route to Amite. He and **Saleta Compton** were planning on taking the southern route around the Sabine reservoir. I chose the northern route and left to take a few more pictures at the Ruby Mize Azalea Garden.

At the garden I ran into **Dr. David Creech** and **Bart Brechter**. Bart is from Houston and the president of the reorganized Texas Chapter. He is one of our newest members and already very active. Dr. Creech was giving away more plants and so I took a few 'Nanjing Beauty' taxodium and Amur maples to try back home in my zone 6 climate. After taking a final walk through the garden and a dozen more pictures, I headed east toward Interstate 49.

I hadn't been on I-49 long when I realized that I was hungry and stopped at a McDonalds for a bite to eat. As I was standing in line, I looked outside and saw Tom and Saleta coming across the parking lot.

As we ate our meal and conversed about the convention, Tom mentioned that he would have liked one of Dr. Creech's 'Nanjing Beauty' taxodium. Since I was currently in possession of four, Tom and Saleta added a 'Nanjing Beauty' and another Amur maple to their plant collection. I have always adhered to the philosophy that if I have two of any plant, you are welcome to one of them.

The rest of my trip to Amite was uneventful. I enjoyed retracing a trip I had made with students across Interstate 10 years before.

I arrived at Amite about 7:30 p.m. and headed out Hwy. 16 to Margie's nursery and house. Once in Margie's driveway I remembered that 19 Boy Scouts were depending on me to schedule a summer camp merit-badge class online. The scheduling process was due to go live at any minute, so I quickly returned to Amite and checked into the Comfort Inn to work.

I had just checked into the room and was preparing to call Margie when the phone rang. Guess who? It was Margie calling to find out why I was not staying at her



Photo: Aaron Cook

▲ Jenkins Farm & Nursery, Amite, Louisiana

▼ Gardens at the home of Robert "Buddy" Lee in Independence, Louisiana



Photo: Aaron Cook

house. I explained the situation and made plans to meet her at the nursery at 7 a.m. the next morning.

When I arrived at the nursery, Margie was backing the golf cart out, and we wasted no time heading out to tour the nursery. For a plant person, her nursery is as close to heaven on earth as you can get. I had a good time looking at plants and talking to Margie, and before I knew it half the day was gone.

We went into the office, and she called Buddy to let him know I was on my way to his place. We said our goodbyes, made future plans for sharing plants, and I headed out.

Driving in rural Louisiana is quite an adventure. I thought driving a loaded school van to Copper Bald with no brakes during the 2001 convention had prepared me for anything; but I was wrong. Here's an important tip. If the sign says curve ahead 15 mph, you had better slow down because the road is going to turn abruptly in a 90-degree fashion.

Someone later referred to these curves as dog legs. If that's the case then that dog had a broken leg. I didn't slow

down enough for the first one and never made that mistake again.

I finally arrived at Buddy's after one wrong turn and backtrack. He had given me instructions to turn onto Highway 442 after passing through Loranger and then take the second paved road to the right. I noticed that the first paved road to the right was named Cook Road, so I knew he lived in a good neighborhood.

Buddy met me in the front yard and gave me a wonderful tour of his place. It is covered with azaleas and it seemed like they were all blooming. I was astonished to discover that all of the plants at Buddy's are his seedlings.

After touring his place and talking plants, I can only conclude that there are many more new plants coming out of Buddy's ambitious breeding projects. He is also working on other plants, including lilies, hollies, loropetalums, and crape-myrtles.

On the way over to John Thornton's place, Buddy and I stopped at a very interesting café. We had a delicious meal of fried catfish, greens, red beans, rice, and candied yams. I didn't tell Buddy, but for a good ole North Carolina boy, this was just like home to me.

Buddy called ahead and John was waiting for us when we pulled into his yard. John's neighborhood used to be shaded by large live oak trees; since Hurricane Katrina it has been in full sun. Even in full sun the azaleas and rhododendrons at John's house and nursery appear to be thriving.

We saw many plants that were hybridized by John using *Rhododendron hyperythrum*. Buddy and I agreed that several of them have commercial viability.

We walked the entire nursery site where plants of all types are planted. John knew the parentage of every plant. I was amazed at the variety of plants grown there. He even had a *R. prinophyllum* 'Marie Hoffman' growing and blooming in full sun. I can't grow this plant in North Carolina less than 75 miles from where it occurs naturally. I asked John how many people he knew who grew elepidote rhododendrons in Southern Louisiana. He held up a single finger and then pointed at himself.

It was a day that I will always remember. I would like to thank Margie, Buddy, and John for going above and beyond in gracious hospitality, and providing me with my own special version of Southern Louisiana lagniappe.

Aaron is a biology and landscape gardening instructor at Caldwell Community College in Hudson, North Carolina. He earned a Bachelor of Science degree in Biology and a Master of Arts degree in Biology Education at Appalachian State University in Boone, North Carolina. He is an active member in the North Carolina Nature Conservancy, Sierra Club, American Rhododendron Society, Azalea Society of America, and International Plant Propagators Society.