

More Flowers, More:

A Summary of the 2007 ASA Convention

Carol Flowers—Washington, D.C.

I had looked forward to the 2007 convention in Texas. Having been born and raised around the New York City metropolitan area and having lived pretty much all of my adult life around Washington, D.C., my main knowledge of Texas was J.R. Ewing and the television show *Dallas*.

Going to the 2007 Azalea Society of America convention in Nacogdoches, Texas, gave me the opportunity to see a different part of this rich and varied land we call the United States of America. Too soon the convention was over.

My husband and I were spending one last day in Nacogdoches, making one final visit to the Ruby M. Mize garden for a few more pictures. Families strolled along the pathways. One little girl dressed in her Sunday best was being rushed through the garden. “Mommy, more flowers, more,” she said. I understood. I, too, wanted to linger amongst the flowers a little longer.

We came to Texas a day before the convention started. I had a new camera and wanted to have some practice with it before events unfolded. The hotel courtyard immediately beckoned. In full bloom were large azaleas plants with big Texas-sized flowers. Already, better photo ops did not exist.

After settling in, we went for a walk on the main street of Nacogdoches. More spectacular azaleas in the town square made me take my camera out once again. Small picturesque shops, art galleries, and restaurants greeted us. Looking for a small souvenir to take back, we stopped at a shop containing artworks created by the artists connected with the local university. I loved what I saw and found a small piece of turned wood to buy.

Early Thursday morning we found our way to the Ruby M. Mize Azalea Garden. Serious photographers were already taking advantage of the early morning light to capture pictures of this beautiful sight. As beautiful as I knew their pictures would be, I also knew the beauty of the garden photos would never truly substitute for actually being in it and seeing the flowers first hand.

The convention finally began. Friendships were renewed, beautiful private and public gardens toured, great speakers heard, and the opportunity to purchase beautiful and unusual azaleas provided. All of our Texas hosts in Tyler and Nacogdoches made us feel welcome and special.

The two Barbaras (**Barbara Stump** and **Barbara Wagner**) did a great job in picking spectacular area gardens in both Tyler and Nacogdoches for us to see. During the day we toured Tyler gardens. **Buddy Lee** and **Joe Schild** presented the people of Tyler with the plaque that made this town an official “Azalea City.” The town’s mayor greeted us and said a few words of welcome. The special East Texas



▲ Texas-sized azaleas bloomed in the courtyard of the Fredonia Hotel in Nacogdoches, Texas.

gardens we saw had been created for many special reasons. In Tyler we saw the “Rose Garden,” built to showcase many roses grown in the city. Tyler also had their “IDEA Garden” created by the Master Gardeners, and the Ina Brundett Azalea Garden at Tyler Junior College created to bring nature’s beauty to everyone connected with the college. Buddy Lee’s Encore® azaleas were in bloom. These have been mystery plants to me.

In Tyler we also had the unique opportunity to see two private gardens created so the owners could enjoy the beauty gardens provide. These included Guy and Joan Pyron’s garden of beautiful azaleas and colorful companion plants and Ravenwood, the home of Mr. and Mrs. Elmer Ellis. The last garden gave me the fun of photographing myself as I explored the garden’s mirrored garden room. The Children’s Garden, created in memory of a child that died too soon, brought smiles and great photographic opportunities.

Saturday was the day to see Nacogdoches. Azaleas in both the private and public gardens were at their peak. Once again my husband and I got to visit the Ruby M. Mize Azalea Garden, this time complete with **Dr. David Creech** entertaining us with his many stories concerning the history and design of this eight-acre garden.

Barbara and **Michael Stump** hosted a Texas barbeque lunch at their Nacogdoches home. Their historical home and their developing gardens provided more photo opportunities. The tour continued during the afternoon, driving through streets where the houses were landscaped with flowering azaleas. More visits to private gardens took place and finally a stop at a local plant nursery to buy plants.

Since I came by plane, I was limited in the number of plants I could bring home. I did however succumb

and bought a small companion plant. It is now in a bigger pot at home and growing very nicely. As with so many of the plants I have bought over the years, maybe someday I will find that special place for it in my yard.

The day was over too quickly, and we were suddenly back at the hotel with enough time to visit the plant sale room and get ready for the convention banquet.

I always marvel at the varied backgrounds of the people that make up the plant world. Planners of the 2007 convention took advantage of these backgrounds when selecting convention speakers. Dr. David Creech, regents professor of horticulture at Stephen F. Austin State University (SFA), provided opening night information on the university's arboretum, its history, its diverse plant collection, and the many connected activities which keep the public coming back to the gardens again and again.

Greg Grant, horticulturist with the SFA Piney Woods Native Plant Center, kept the audience entertained and laughing with pictures of garden sculptures made with some rather strange materials (soda bottles, tires, etc.—no bronze or marble in this art).

Friday night we heard from folks whose original day jobs had involved the medical field. **Buddy Lee**, the past president of the ASA and creator of the multi-season-blooming Encore® azaleas, spoke about his favorite part of the plant world: azaleas. I had finally seen a blooming Encore® azalea and so loved it. **Len Miller** was our second speaker. He spoke of his love of Japanese gardens and the many he has designed and built over the years he has studied landscaping.



▲ An East Texas garden sculpture.

Photo Carol Flowers

Our banquet speaker was **Tom Spencer**, a Texas-based television producer, freelance writer, photographer, and radio personality. In his speech, "The Soul of the Garden," he discussed the spiritual side of gardening. He ended by showing video clips. There was something magical that had been captured in these garden scenes. Words did not have to be used. His Web site, www.soulofthegarden.com, captures more and expands that magic.

During the Society's annual meeting life-time achievement awards were presented to **Margie Jenkins** and **Joe Schild**. A garden rocker was presented to **Barbara Stump** in recognition of her many years of hard work as editor of *The Azalean*. Results of the election of officers for the Society were announced. **John Brown** is our new president, **Aaron Cook** is vice president, and **Dan Krabill** is treasurer. The three new directors were elected to the ASA board: **Vincent Ciolino**, **J. Jackson**, and **Dave Nanney**.

As with all ASA conventions, opportunities to acquire new plants were plentiful. Both my husband and I won plants at the opening night raffle. The plant-sale room was well stocked, a plant nursery was visited on the tour of Nacogdoches, and a plant auction was held after the annual meeting. I discovered that large two-and-a-half gallon clear plastic bags exist. Filled with my plants they fit well in the overhead luggage compartments of the airplane. My plants made it safely home.

Sunday came and our plane would leave for D.C., the next day. We drove around the azalea trails and visited some of the historic Nacogdoches buildings. There was one last trip to the Ruby M Mize Azalea Garden. Long shadows and the late afternoon sun made the garden even more breathtaking than the first day we saw it.

The people from Nacogdoches are proud of their credentials as an "Azalea City" and rightly so. That night I thought of all the gracious and wonderful people we met in Tyler and Nacogdoches. The azalea blooms were rapidly fading but the happy memories would continue.

On Tuesday morning back in D.C., I was in withdrawal. That morning's Washington Post had an article on the cherry blossoms. They were at peak bloom. With my now not-so-new camera in tow, I headed down to the tidal basin. It was early morning. Serious photographers and broadcasting network people were working to capture the ephemeral beauty of the flowers.

I re-read the plaque that explained that the trees were a gift to Americans from the Japanese people. I thought of all the contributions the Japanese have made to the azalea world and Tom Spencer's speech, "The Soul of the Garden." May the Japanese, Americans, and all people continue to plant flowers, work for peace, and cherish our plant world. As the little four-year-old said, "...more flowers, more."

Before retiring, Carol Flowers managed a computer help desk for the U.S. Census Bureau. Her interest in azaleas came from her many childhood visits to the Planting Fields Arboretum in Oyster Bay, New York. She has been a member of the Azalea Society of America for 25 years.



▲ The Ruby M. Mize Azalea Garden provided a multitude of photo opportunities.

Photo Carol Flowers