

Couple's Gardens Blooming After 20 Years of Hard Work

By SaraAnne Corrigan—Evansville, Indiana

Last year, Steve and Beverly Knight listed an achievement that was 20 years in the making: Their property – about 50 acres in all – spanning the Gibson and Pike county lines, which they have named “The Azalea Path,” was designated by the State of Indiana as an arboretum and botanical garden and awarded non-profit status. It is also classified as a forest preserve, says Beverly Knight.

As the name suggests, there are a lot of azaleas there; the couple has long since lost count of how many, although they planted every single one of them and continue to add more every spring.

“I fell in love with azaleas many years ago, largely because of the work of Dr. H.R. Schroeder,” says Beverly Knight, an Evansville native and retired UPS driver.

The late Dr. Schroeder was an Evansville obstetrician who lived in the McCutchanville area; he began hybridizing azaleas more than 50 years ago, says Jeanne Brown, a member of the local Azalea Society and an Azalea Path devotee. Schroeder is credited with developing particularly colorful and cold-hardy azaleas that flourish in the Tri-State area, which is rather at the northern climate boundary for azaleas, she says.

“He developed 38 varieties and I am proud to say I have 37 of them on this property,” Beverly says with pride.

Beverly allows that her husband, Steve, was the proverbial late bloomer when it came to gardening and landscaping; their marriage is only 15 years old, but Beverly has owned the real estate since 1979 and began developing it on her own in the mid-1980s. She says, however, that Steve, while not yet retired (he works in maintenance for the City of Petersburg), quickly rose to the occasion.

When she bought the place “it was all woods and gullies,” Beverly recalls; the couple has done and continues to do virtually all of the work themselves, “which is why you will never see this place free of weeds,” she quips. The property is blessed with a natural creek; the Knights added two large lakes and a waterfall.

Spring, of course, is the most colorful time of year at the Azalea Path: In addition to azaleas, there are wisteria vines, lilacs, dogwoods, redbuds, rhododendrons and a myriad of unusual trees and shrubs.

“There is something of interest to see here from April through October,” Beverly says of the season during which time the property is open to the public.

“We have school kids up here in the fall and they can collect leaves from 60 different kinds of trees without ever having to walk too far off the road,” she explains, “You name a tree and we probably have it here somewhere.”

The Knights conduct guided tours, Beverly says, but they

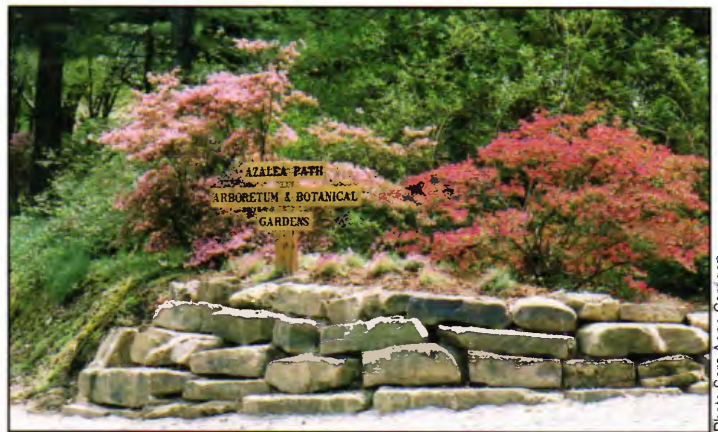


Photo Sara Anne Corrigan

▲ Steve and Beverly Knight's Azalea Path

also allow individuals and groups to wander the property on their own.

“Last year, without our having done any advertising at all, we had more than 4,000 visitors,” she says. This summer will likely be much busier: The Pike County Chamber of Commerce and the Gibson County Visitors and Tourism Bureau both are promoting the site.

Eric Heindenreich, executive director of the Gibson County Visitors and Tourism Bureau and a member of the Azalea Path board of directors, says his first visit there was last fall, “when there really wasn’t a lot of color,” and he still found it to be “an amazing place—a labor of love on the part of the Knights—and a thing I really wanted (our office) to get behind.”

The Azalea Path “has given Gibson County a marketable group tour attraction. It’s a priority for us now—a hidden treasure that we are promoting this coming year as one of three group tour attractions in the county,” Heindenreich says, explaining that Lyles Station and the upcoming Toyota Visitors Center/factory tour site are the other two.

Alycia Church, executive director of the Pike County Chamber of Commerce and another Azalea Path board member, says that Pike County does not have a tourism office, so the Chamber handles that kind of publicity and her office is thrilled to have an asset like the Azalea Path to promote: “I went there for the first time about three years ago. I have lived around here all my life and I had had been driving by it for years, but I always thought it was just a beautifully landscaped private home.

“I was amazed to learn the Knights opened it up to the public!”

SaraAnne Corrigan is a freelance writer in Evansville, Indiana.