

The Making of the Margie Y. Jenkins Azalea Garden

Regina P. Bracy—Hammond, Louisiana

Margie Yates Jenkins has always enjoyed “growing things.” Her mother would leave a spot in the vegetable garden so the young Margie could plant a few seeds herself. Margie felt such pride when she could pick a few beans of her own to put in the family’s bucket.

Margie’s husband, Bryant Jenkins, operated a dairy farm and grew watermelons for most of his life. After her five children (Freddie, Margie Ann, Timothy, Jeffrey, and Mark) entered school, she and Bryant started a small growing operation in the early 1960s and continued it for the next 15 years.

Many of Margie’s relatives were already in the nursery business. Her brother, Fred Yates, was married to Mr. Price McGee’s daughter, and her sister, Doris, was married to Dallas McGee’s only son. Price and Dallas McGee had opened the first nursery business in Folsom, Louisiana. Margie’s brother and brother-in-law also started their own nursery businesses. Having relatives in the nursery business gave the Jenkins’ a basic understanding of how a nursery operated.

A Plant Person Is Born

While attending Louisiana State University, Margie Ann (Margie’s daughter) heard about a summer course taught by Dr. Neil Odenwald, LSU Professor Emeritus and author. The course was aimed at extension workers, county agents, and others who were interested in garden design and design theory. Margie Ann persuaded her mother to take the course, which completely changed Margie’s thinking about plants.

“When I came back that was my goal,” she said, “to

▼ Margie Jenkins among her favorite flowers, azaleas.



grow things that were unusual. Of course, a lot of the old plants, too, I wanted to grow—and of course, natives.”

In 1977, Margie at the age of 56 was ready to take on the challenge of reopening the nursery to grow different types of plants. She hired six workers with the dairy paying their salaries, so she did not have to borrow any money to start the nursery. After talking with many of the big wholesalers around Folsom, Margie found that none of them were catering to customers in New Orleans or to a small contractor who was supplying the New Orleans landscape market. She decided that this was her niche: “the guys in the pickup trucks.”

Margie Yates Jenkins Azalea Garden

In the beginning.....there was chatter among friends.

We wanted to recognize the many contributions that Ms. Margie has made to horticulture. She had lots of awards. But we wanted something lasting, something that would grow, something that would be enjoyed by many.....a Garden!

An idea was born. Regina Bracy was building a new program at the Hammond Research Station. Buddy Lee was searching for a suitable tribute. Perfect, said Buddy, a garden in honor of Ms. Margie.

Her friends were enthused. Ms. Margie was hesitant... I’m not noteworthy, she said. But we thought otherwise, so after much convincing Ms. Margie agreed to lend her name to the garden.

So a Garden Party was planned and all Ms. Margie’s friends were invited. If we ask, they will give. If we build it, they will come. And so they did.....

The establishment of the Margie Y. Jenkins Azalea Garden means we will have a continuing feature at the Hammond Research Station to honor a remarkable woman. This garden will be a source of information, an inspiration, a delight to visit....much as Ms. Margie is and has been during her lifetime.

Front insert of Margie Y. Jenkins Garden Party program, 2006



▲ Margie Jenkins in the garden bearing her name.

Introduction of Robin Hill Azaleas

Azalea production in the southeastern United States in the 1970s had focused on the Southern Indian, Kurume, and a couple of Glenn Dale varieties of azaleas. As Margie was active in national azalea meetings, she knew of the hardier varieties grown as far north as New York. Always a seeker of new and interesting plants, she bought rooted-cuttings of several varieties of Robin Hill azaleas and other hybrid groups and put them in production at her nursery. Now in any process of discovery, there is a wildcard. For Margie, it was the cold blast that the area received in the winter of 1983.

Southern azaleas suffered tremendous damage during the winter of 1983, but the hardiness of these “new” varieties was demonstrated. This cold hardiness and the off-season blooming habit that Margie later observed convinced her to propagate and expand the market for new azaleas. Names like ‘Arabesk’, ‘Watchet’, ‘Janet Rhea’, ‘Hardy Gardenia’ that were on a Jenkins Nursery liner receipt in 1981 are now stock-in-trade items of southern nurseries.

When the Azalea Society of America conferred its Distinguished Service Award on Margie in 2007, the tribute acknowledged “the increased use of Robin Hill azalea cultivars and other azalea hybrid groups in the southeastern United States can be attributed to her [Ms. Margie’s] interest

in growing and distributing these plants prior to other wholesale producers.”

Today, she still watches her crops with the eye for discovery that had her notice a sport of ‘Watchet’. She isolated and propagated this white sport and named it ‘Freddie’ in on honor of her son. ‘Freddie’ was featured on the cover of the *The Azalean* Winter 2006 issue.

A Garden Is Born...

Few among us have the national contacts and recognition or the huge circle of friends, family, and admirers that Margie has.

“We wanted to do something to celebrate the many contributions this dynamic woman has made to horticulture, the Green industry, and to the personal development and education of so many horticulturists,” said Dr. Regina Bracy, professor and resident coordinator at the Hammond Research Station. “So in 2006, we threw a Garden Party for Ms. Margie and collected \$53,000 for the establishment and maintenance of the Margie Y. Jenkins Azalea Garden.”

The garden started in a “straw stand” of pines. Straw stand refers to the small tract of pine trees that bordered strawberry fields in the area more than 50 years ago. The stands were so named because they served the purpose of providing the pine straw that was used to mulch the strawberry crop.

Dr. Odenwald, co-author of *Identification, Selection and Use of Southern Plants for Landscape Design*, was commissioned to design the garden layout. He laid out beds that curled and curved around the pine trees and envisioned walkways, water features, and resting areas nestled under the shade of the tall trees. Staff at the Hammond Research Station began marking out the garden design, installing irrigation lines, hauling soil amendment, and preparing the beds.

In September 2006, the first azaleas were planted in the garden. Margie selected the first group to be planted and, of course, these were her favorite Robin Hill cultivars of which she selected 13. Also included in this first planting were 23 cultivars of Encore® Azaleas, a nod to the other plant aficionado and breeder from Southeast Louisiana, Robert “Buddy” Lee.

Later the Crimson azaleas (‘Crimson Majesty’, ‘Crimson Queen’, and ‘Crimson Princess’) developed by another Louisianan, Richard Odom of Country Pines Nursery, were added to the garden. The size of the garden was doubled in 2007 with the addition of Southern Indian azaleas.

As most people who know Margie know, her love of plants is not limited to azaleas. Visitors to Jenkins Nursery are often treated to “the tour,” a ride in a golf cart with Ms. Margie. Here the visitor can appreciate Ms. Margie’s extensive knowledge of native plants while viewing an amazing collection of said plants. Ms. Margie is also known for her generous sharing of her plants, and most visitors leave with at least one interesting specimen.



▲ Margie Y. Jenkins Garden was started in 2006 and is a young garden with good bones.

We have tried to incorporate this fun and curiosity in the Margie Y. Jenkins Garden. One can find Japanese maples, *Wisteria*, *Hibiscus*, huckleberry, *Viburnum*, *Osmanthus*, *Lonicera*, *Abelia*, *Styrax*, *Camellia*, *Hosta*, *Itea*, *Illicium*, *Ilex*, *Dianella*, *Leucothoe*, *Aucuba*, *Euonymus*, farkleberry, and *Loropetalum*.

Native trees include *Callicarpa*, *Carpinus*, *Catalpa*, *Cedrus*, *Chionanthus* (fringe tree), *Cornus*, *Crataegus* (hawthorn), *Malus*, *Fagus*, *Gordonia*, *Sinojackia* (jacktree), *Nyssa*, *Halesia* (silverbell), *Acer*, *Quercus*, persimmon, sassafras, *Ulmus*, and *Prunus*. Magnolias include Japanese, Southern, *ashei*, *tripetala*, *macrophylla*, and sweetbay. Other plants include *Beschorneria* (false red agave), *Lespedeza*, *Myrica*, *Aleurites* (tung oil).

Spotlighted around a sugar kettle is Margie's white azalea selection 'Freddie'. Also one can find nestled among the azaleas such interesting plants as *Leucothoe axillaris* 'Jenkins', named after its developer Margie.

The Margie Y. Jenkins Azalea Garden is a young garden with a great future. It will be an integral part of the new Landscape Horticulture Research and Extension Center being developed at the LSU AgCenter's Hammond Research Station.

The plaque at the entrance to the garden best sums up the person for whom the garden was named. "Margie Y. Jenkins...A person with a passion for plants and plant people." With the establishment of this garden, we will have a continuing feature that will educate people about azaleas and native plants. This garden will be a source of information, an inspiration, a delight to visit...much as Margie is and has been during her lifetime.

Regina Bracy is Professor of Horticulture and Resident Coordinator of Louisiana State University AgCenter's Hammond Research Station in Hammond, Louisiana.

Letters to the Editor

Mini-blinds not recommended for ID tags

Some time back, I read a short article in *The Azalean* promoting the use of discarded mini-blinds to make identification tags for azaleas. For a few years I relied heavily on this material and told others how well it worked. Well, after much disappointment in finding the writing – from both pencil and indelible Sharpie-type pens – totally or partially gone, I have personally banned the use in my garden and propagation containers.

Apparently a layer of material from the mini-blind strips falls off, taking the writing with it. I have tried attaching the strips to plants in open air, sticking the strip into the medium along the pot edge, and placing it underneath mulch or a stone at the base of the plant. In most cases the writing did not survive. Strips covered with medium or soil did last longer than those fully exposed to air, sun, rain and watering.

I now have too many azaleas, mostly in pots grown from seeds or cuttings, that are unknown as to variety or source due to the use of mini-blind identification tags. If you use this material I advise checking the tags weekly and being prepared to write over the information on the tag with graphite pencil or fine tip permanent marker.

For my permanent plant tags, I use either old aluminum offset printing plates cut into strips; pure copper plant tags from Lee Valley Garden tools; or thick plastic strips which are waste materials from credit card manufacturers. I have fully legible identification tags dating to 1983 that are made from offset printing plates.

I wish someone had a company where you could send a list of plant labels and have good permanent ones made.

Mike Creel

Lexington, South Carolina

Spring issue enjoyed

I received *The Azalean* (Spring 2008 issue) yesterday and I enjoyed reading every article. Thank you.

Yoriko Chin

Rockville, Maryland

In Memory

Tom Anderson, Major, U.S. Army retired, passed away March 8 at the age of 81. Tom was drafted at the age of 17 and continued with a military career. He saw conflict in the European Theater, Korea, and Vietnam. He was highly decorated, including the Bronze Star with Oak Leaf Cluster and the Purple Heart.

Tom was a long time member and Vice President of the Oconee Chapter.