

Learning—A Look Back at Louisiana Lagniappe

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Before leaving the ASA convention in New Orleans, **Pam Fitch** asked me to write a wrap-up article on our 2010 gathering. As in the past, I was happy to do this. Recently she sent an e-mail stating that the deadline for the article was coming up soon. I began to think about what I wanted to say. Each convention I have attended has been special. Every host organization has put in a lot of time, thought, and effort into making the convention in their part of the world special and memorable. As hosts the Louisiana Chapter of the Society continued this tradition. The New Orleans venue provided a new and different spot to showcase gardens containing azaleas, eat lots of wonderful Gulf Coast seafood, and learn more about plants from knowledgeable plantsmen.

From the Louisiana ASA Chapter we learned a new word. They hoped while attending the convention we would experience “lagniappe,” an old Louisiana French custom of giving customers a little extra. I think all of us who attended the convention would agree we received that “extra.”

If you remember last winter, many parts of the U.S., including Washington, D.C. where I live, had more record snow falls and broken snow shovels than we have experienced in previous winters. Thus last March we looked forward to spending some time in a warm place away from icy roads and snow drifts.

What I wanted was to find the New Orleans outdoor café I remembered being at when I was a small child. We arrived the Saturday before the convention and on Sunday took an early morning walk around the French Quarter. A place called Jackson Square came into view.

“That’s it,” I said to my husband. “There is the doughnut place I remember. We ate some kind of doughnuts with lots of powdered sugar and drank a very strong coffee that had lots of hot milk in it.” I knew before leaving New Orleans

▼ Convention attendees gathered for a group photo after touring at Buddy Lee’s nursery.



▲ ASA members line up to receive an Encore® Azalea during the tour of Buddy Lee’s Transcend Nursery.

▼ Convention attendees enjoyed a tour of Longue Vue Gardens. The estate was designed in 1939-1942 for philanthropists Edgar Bloom Stern, a New Orleans cotton broker, and his wife Edith Rosenwald Stern, an heiress to the Sears-Roebuck fortune.



this time I would again have to eat another of these doughnuts without the holes. During the week I learned that this famous place is called “Café Du Monde” and has been famous for its special doughnuts, known as beignets, for more than 100 years. No wonder my New Orleans relatives had made a point of taking us to this special place so many years ago.

During the Monday convention tour we drove north out of New Orleans. Having lived most of my life in the northeast, it is always a treat for me to see plant life different from what grows in Washington, D.C. **Buddy Lee**, **Regina Bracy**, and **Margie Jenkins** all own plant nurseries in this area. All three nursery owners gave us tours of their places.

Encore® Azaleas are very popular in the Washington, D.C. area. Lowe’s and other local nurseries sell them. Last November I saw some blooming in a small garden near my Maryland home. As I strolled through Buddy Lee’s Transcend Nursery listening to Buddy talk, I took lots of pictures. I knew I was going to enjoy sharing what I had seen and heard when I got back home. Buddy was generous in giving each of us one of his latest Encore® introductions to take home.

The next stop on our tour was Bracy Nursery. The nursery originally had been the Bracy family dairy farm. Gradually the 160 acre farm evolved into row upon row of containerized plants. The designs made by the many varieties of plants growing in the nursery made for great pictures.

Outside the Bracy’s home was a feature not practical in the northeast, but one I always thought would be nice to have—an outdoor kitchen. Using these facilities a lunch of freshly fried fish had been prepared. We had already been treated to special Louisiana foods at **Buddy Lee’s** nursery. I enjoyed it all wishing for a bigger stomach.

After lunch we drove to **Margie Jenkins’** nursery. Only a few azaleas were in bloom throughout our stay in Louisiana due to the cold winter this area had experienced. The plus side of these circumstances was that other blooming plants got their chance to show off. The Jenkins farm had both camellias and lots of native Louisiana plants that Ms. Margie enjoyed talking about and showing off. She had been growing lots of her latest azalea selection named ‘Freddy’ and offered each of us one of the plants. Dessert was served at this stop. Obviously people from Louisiana don’t want anyone to go away hungry.

Our final destination of the day before heading back to the French Quarter was the Louisiana State University Ag Center’s Hammond Research Station. This facility was first developed in January 1922 to provide help to strawberry and truck-crop farmers. Now **Regina Bracy**, resident coordinator of the station, works to create new programs to serve the emerging green industry. These programs include those involved in landscape horticulture research and extension services.

The Margie Y. Jenkins Azalea Garden, first started in 1996 to recognize the contributions Ms. Margie has made to the horticulture industry, shone as a prominent part of the research station. Many of us who read about the garden in



Photo Pam Fitch

▲ Convention Chairperson Regina Bracy welcomes ASA members to New Orleans.

▼ Louisiana Chapter President Allen Owens discussed the challenges of gardening in the deep South.



Photo Pam Fitch

previous editions of *The Azalean* enjoyed seeing the extensive collection of azalea varieties planted at this location..

Our Louisiana hosts felt we would be hungry after touring the gardens. More Louisiana cuisine greeted us at dinner. As we ate, several speakers discussed the many contributions individuals from Louisiana have made in improving azaleas. We also learned how the people in Louisiana had shown great resilience in rebuilding their state after the destruction caused by Hurricane Katrina. **Buddy Lee** presented the Society’s distinguished service awards to **Maarten van der Giessen** and **John Thornton**.

After dinner, the tour buses drove us back to the French Quarter. There was not a lot of talking on the trip back. We had seen a lot, eaten a lot, and had continued to learn about some of our favorite plants. It had been a happy day.

I had a some difficulty trying to describe our Tuesday tour day. **Regina Bracy’s** article published in a prior edition of *The Azalean* had described the experiences that we would have on the convention tours. What she accurately described was what we experienced. In her article she included the websites for the city institutions we would see on our second day of touring the New Orleans area. Rather than



▲ Past ASA President Robert "Buddy" Lee addressed members.

▼ Margie Jenkins led a tour at her nursery located in Amite, Louisiana.



repeat what Regina wrote I thought I would share some of the information supplied by those Internet pages.

The New Orleans Botanical Garden is a part of New Orleans' 1,300 acre City Park. This park is the sixth largest and seventh most visited park in the U.S. According to Wikipedia, it was originally established in the 17th century. Its size significantly increased during the early 20th century when additional land was purchased for the park. A master plan to guide the park development was created. During the 1930s, numerous federal relief agencies such as the Works Progress Administration (WPA) implemented those plans.

The forerunner of what we know today as the New Orleans Botanical Gardens was opened in 1936, and it was called the Rose Garden. In the 1980s this garden was in poor condition. Many organizations, volunteers, and donors came together to revitalize and improve the garden. The garden was renamed the New Orleans Botanical Gardens and much work was done to create large collections of plants from around the world. In 2005, Hurricane Katrina did extensive damage to the area destroying the plant collections. Six months after the catastrophe the garden reopened. Donors and volunteers had come together to start the process of creating a new and better garden.

On one side of the botanical gardens is a section called the Zemurray Azalea and Camellia Garden. Camellias, azaleas, and magnolias provide the background environment for the sculptures created by the 1930's artist Enrique Alferez.

Besides just being a pretty place to visit, the New Orleans Botanical Garden provides extensive educational programs for both adults and children. These include both tours for school groups and classes in such subjects as writing, drawing, plants and environmental issues. Garden shows and concerts take place on the site. Private and public groups use the setting for weddings and other celebrations.

I have just touched on the web information you can find on these gardens. The official Web site www.garden.neworleanscitypark.com can provide more information. Wikipedia also provides a good description of the garden.

The Sydney and Walda Besthoff Sculpture Garden is an open-air five-acre part of the New Orleans Museum of Art (NOMA). In the early 1970s, Sydney and Walda Besthoff bought their first sculpture for the office building used by their family-owned drugstore chain. Over a period of years, they bought many more modern sculptures and placed them in sites in and around their office building. In 1978, the couple established the Sydney and Walda Besthoff Foundation, dedicating it to the cultivation of public interest in art, particularly sculpture. Much of their personal sculpture collection became part of the foundation. It was displayed mainly in and around the office building they owned.

With their mission in mind, the Besthoff Foundation needed a more public space for the growing sculpture collection. A successful \$10 million fund raising campaign and the designation of a five-acre site became the beginnings of the sculpture garden. Ground breaking for the garden took place in 2001, and the garden opened in November of 2003. Twenty-seven 200-year-old live oak trees, 344 azaleas in three varieties, and pine and magnolia trees provided the background setting for the 54 pieces of sculpture in the garden. Groups of volunteer gardeners lovingly help maintain both the plant life and the sculptures that exist in the garden. Weddings and private and public celebrations are held in the garden during evening hours, while the public has free access during scheduled daily daytime hours.

NOMA's education department works hard to create many educational opportunities for the surrounding communities and visitors. School groups tour the garden and learn to appreciate the many facets of sculpture. Classes in yoga and pilates take place on the site. Listed on NOMA's website, www.noma.org, are the many educational opportunities open to the public. Included on the website is information that can be used for educational purposes by individuals and educators worldwide. Many useful educators-manuals created by NOMA's education department are found on this website. One manual is on the Sculpture Garden and includes a field guide written specifically for helping students identify and learn more about the garden's plants and sculptures.

The Internet may have come into public awareness only 20 years ago, but it has provided learning opportunities that many older people could not have envisioned. The Web has given us easy access to learning opportunities and made learning more fun.

Longue Vue "country estate" was built during the years 1939-1942 for Edgar and Edith Stern. It was established on 12 acres located within a 20-minute drive of the New Orleans business district. During the years that the Sterns lived in the house, famous people such as Eleanor Roosevelt, John and Robert Kennedy, and Jack Benny were entertained.

The gardens originally designed by famous landscape architect Ellen Shipman consist of 12 garden rooms. The organizational website, www.longue.com, shows pictures of and describes these rooms. After Shipman's death in 1950, the architects of the house, William and Geoffrey Platt, continued implementing Shipman's designs. In the early 1960s the Platt brothers and Mrs. Stern took a trip to Spain and Portugal. The architects used what they learned to continue the evolution of the garden. During the 60s, the decision was made by the Stern family to open the estate to the public. Garden changes with this goal in mind were implemented.

The garden room I enjoyed most was a one-half-acre space created in 1998 called "The Lucy C. Roussel Discovery Garden." In that garden, children and adults alike have an opportunity to learn about the plants that give us food, clothing, and shelter. The opportunity to touch and smell flowers and herbs adds to the delight in visiting the garden.

Longue Vue provides many opportunities for both children and adults to take classes and hear lectures on many subjects including information on the environment, gardening, and the decorative arts. Its well designed website provides further opportunity to learn about plants, the environment, and the people that live in our world.

The time we spent at Longue Vue was all too short. In writing this article, I wished my home in D.C. was closer to this beautiful garden spot. However, I did enjoy reliving the experience by rereading its website.

In Summary

All of the yearly azalea conventions I have attended have seemed to end too soon. This one in New Orleans was no exception. During the days of the convention we did come to experience and understand the new word we learned, lagniappe. Although I won't implement many of the new gardening ideas I heard about, I now know these ideas exist. With each convention I learn more about the American Continent. Easier methods of travel make these learning opportunities possible. Development of the Internet has made finding worldwide information so much easier. I hope all of us will continue to take advantage of learning opportunities now afforded to us by easier ways of travel and the Internet.

Hopefully we will continue to remain curious plant lovers, occasionally meeting face to face and in so doing learning from each other. Hopefully we will continue to use



Photo Pam Fitch

▲ Convention attendees toured the propagation greenhouses at Bracy's Nursery.

▼ The LSU Ag Center Hammond Research Station covers 150 acres. Research is focused on landscape horticulture, including plant selection, fertility, weed control, and plant growth regulators.



Photo Pam Fitch

forms of technology such as the Internet to enrich our lives. With these opportunities we will continue to integrate what we learn about plants with other facets of life. We will enjoy the arts more and more deliberately work to preserve and protect our natural environment.

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 more than 25 years.

Call for Articles

The Azalean needs articles about azaleas, their care, and their use in the landscape. Articles should be submitted as Microsoft Word documents. Illustrations are highly encouraged.

Submit articles to: Pam Fitch; Editor, *The Azalean*; P.O. Box 632537; Nacogdoches, TX 75963 or e-mail: theazalean@gmail.com.