

Magnolia Gardens Introduces French Student Exchange Program

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Most of us remember Magnolia Plantation and Gardens we visited during the 2000 ASA national convention. The gardens are internationally known for its collection of old European camellias and azaleas planted in a romantic-style setting.

The gardens were opened to the public in 1870 by the Drayton family. They still own and operate the gardens today and are still in pursuit of those original varieties which have gone by the wayside over the years. Today, though, they are being assisted by the Great Gardens of America Preservation Alliance (GGAPA), which was formed by Magnolia Gardens and headed up by Miles Beach, director of the Magnolia Gardens camellia collection. But then, that's another story (see *The Azalean*, Vol. 31, No. 2, Summer 2008).

Last summer, Magnolia Gardens took another step into the international arena when Diane de Roquette from the French Heritage office in Paris visited the gardens with a tour group and ran into Director of Gardens Tom Johnson. Naturally the two started talking shop with the subject being how the European romantic gardens evolved and came to the United States.

One thing led to another and after returning to Paris, Diane contacted Tom about a student exchange internship program with French horticultural students. Naturally, Tom was interested and soon after, Greg Jaye of the French Heritage Society in New York visited Magnolia Gardens to review the intern study program developed by Tom. However, Tom's work doesn't stop here, because he intends to develop a true exchange program that includes Americans going to France to study. Soon after Greg's visit, two young men from France showed up at Magnolia Gardens' door ready to learn and share.

Both are students at the prestigious Versailles National School of Landscape Horticulture in Paris, which, by the way, is a second degree program to qualify. Jean-Christophe Pigeon and Thibault Jeandel had been chosen to be the first students from Versailles to come to the United States on the internship program. Their duties included helping with the goals and objectives of the GGAPA and sharing their knowledge of the romantic gardens of France and other European countries. When they return to France, they will be assisting the Alliance in looking for azalea and camellia varieties that have been lost here in America.

Jean, a graphic designer, is studying the design of parks and gardens and is working on a special project of Versailles that incorporates a vegetable garden. His tour in the United States has been invaluable in adding knowledge to his data base of the diverse range of vegetables we grow in the South, knowledge he will carry back to France and put to use there.



▲ Christophe Pigeon (left) and Thibault Jeandel.

On the other hand, Tibault is a musician. He is using his background to work with landscape designers to develop ways to incorporate natural sounds into garden design. For instance, take a park in a busy downtown area with heavy traffic, buses, trucks, and horns, but devoid of birds singing, rustling leaves, or a bubbling brook. It wouldn't be much of a serene setting. But what if those sounds were engineered and amplified into the design. Would that make a difference?

Both exchange students were enthralled with our Spanish moss-draped trees. They had seen the movie *Gone with the Wind* but explained "until you live in this environment, you just can't imagine the added effect it would have had on one seeing the movie." Something we take for granted?

Jean and Tibault were taken on a tour of several southern states—from South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, to Louisiana and back. I asked each what impressed him the most, but first had to listen to the diet Tom and Miles had subjected them to as they made their way on this trip. Might as well tell you, barbecue came up as "A No. 1" on their list. Think about this: these two guys back in Paris, firing up a grill, throwing on several racks of ribs, and icing down a keg of beer. What will the French think of us now?

Anyway, back to their tour. They visited public and private gardens as well as commercial nurseries, including Cal-laway, Bellingrath, and the botanical gardens at Louisiana State University. Although they missed the "big spring show" of azaleas, they came away with this thought: "It's not so much formal but random planting that resembles organization and planning that catches the eye and makes one feel at ease and comfortable. Something we need in our stressful world."

To this I say: "Amen!"

Jim Thornton is a cofounder and the first president of the Oconee Chapter. He has served as a director, vice president, and president of the Azalea Society of America.