

# Magnolia Plantation Alive and Well After Floods in Just Three Days

*By Tom Johnson—Charleston, South Carolina*

People across the country have asked how Magnolia Plantation and Gardens, America's oldest garden, fared in October, 2015, during the torrential rain and flooding that drenched South Carolina.

I have witnessed two tornadoes, but nothing prepared me for this storm that dumped more than 27 inches of rain in 24 hours. That was bad, but the "super moon" made it worse. The rain and the super moon combined to produce the highest tides ever recorded at Magnolia.

The Ashley River, which flows along Magnolia's boundary, is a tidal river. When the tide comes in, the river flows north away from Charleston. Once the tide recedes, the river flows back toward the city. The river was an important avenue of travel in early South Carolina when there were few roads and tourists. Goods were loaded on barges and, as the tide came in, passengers could make their way by river to the plantations. When the tide receded, the barges returned to Charleston.

During the storm, because the tide was so high, the Ashley River jumped its banks. The dike around Magnolia's nature preserve was breeched by more than a foot of water. This meant there was nowhere for the rainwater to run off. When the tide went out, the river remained at capacity because of the inland rainwater that was flowing down river. That meant that the rainwater at Magnolia had no place to go. Magnolia's dedicated employees made the difference. If it were not for them, the gardens probably would have received massive damage.

Eight employees live at Magnolia and once the major flooding was evident they sprang into action. They donned their rain gear and went to work. Because of Magnolia's earlier history as a rice plantation the property is crisscrossed by canals and ditches. In good times, we utilize that drainage network to move water around to keep



Photo Tom Johnson

▲ The Ashley River breaches the dam.

▼ Audubon Swamp overflowing and flooding.



Photo Tom Johnson



our lakes full and attractive. During the flood that network became invaluable in controlling the floodwaters.

We quickly became aware of the tremendous amount of water, and, if we didn't respond effectively and quickly, we would not have been able to handle the situation. We decided what areas we would flood and what areas we would try to preserve. Flowerdale was installed in 1685 by Ann Fox Drayton, the first mistress on the plantation. Today that area is recognized as America's oldest garden. We decided that garden would be preserved at all cost! The gardens around the main house were planted prior to 1830 by the Rev. John Grimké Drayton and the enslaved workers. These gardens are where the first azaleas were planted outside in America, and they have camellias that we have documented were planted by the Rev. Drayton himself. That area could never be replaced. It too had to be protected at all cost!

The decision was made to flood all other areas to preserve these valuable parts of the gardens. Quickly, we began thinking "Ok, what can we fix after the storm is over?" The decision was made to flood parking lots, lawn areas, and even the more current flower beds. During the storm, employees used the backhoe to block the canals that drain the Audubon Swamp. The swamp was allowed to overflow, which flooded the entrance road through the gardens and wooded areas with more than a foot of water. The water also reached the dwellings that were once the homes of the enslaved workers, but those structures were not damaged.

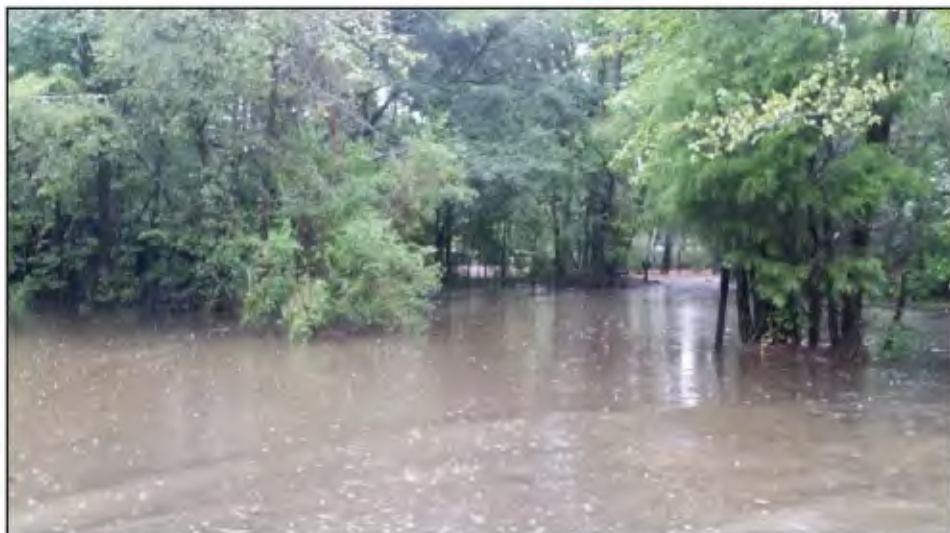


Photo Tom Johnson

▲ Magnolia's Parking Lots with more than one foot of water.

▼ Water flooding Tram Road and running through gardens.



Photo Tom Johnson



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The White Bridge Pond was pushed to the limit, and the arches of the bridge were submerged. Water flowed over the lawn at the main house and to the herb garden, but it stopped before the ground floor of the house. We opened the canals to drain the ponds only when we reached the point of damaging those parts of the gardens we wanted to protect. As the tide receded, we released water into the boat pond reservoir as fast as the Ashley River would allow us to drain the grounds. We decided not to repair the breach in the dike to relieve the water pressure throughout the gardens. Once the storm was over, I noticed that the 18-foot dike had collapsed in one area and only five feet of integrity remained. We have a maintenance staff with nerves of steel!

In some of the flat areas of the gardens, our horticulturists constructed small ponds with the backhoe so water could drain off the historic plant material. Once the storm passed, they refilled and cleaned the areas.

During the storm we ordered more materials such as gravel for the walks, asphalt for the roads, rye grass, and replacement flowers. Most vendors could not ship immediately because some roads in the Charleston area were closed. We understood that, but we wanted to ensure we were first on the list when shipping resumed.

It is amazing that all of this was accomplished with eight employees in a 48-hour period. The gardens were closed for two days. The morning of the third day all areas were reopened with the exception of The Audubon Swamp Garden and the Nature Boat. The rest of the staff returned to work Monday, and by Thursday we were operating normally.

The water was a problem, but it was not our biggest headache. The national news media was telling the world that the storm closed Charleston, and that story continued to be sent out over the next couple of weeks.

In spite of the flooding and the exaggerated reporting that may have kept some visitors away from Charleston and Magnolia, the gardens fared well during this ordeal because of Magnolia's greatest asset: our dedicated staff.



Photo Tom Johnson

▲ Water draining from Magnolia back to the Ashley River as the tide goes out.

**Tom Johnson** is the executive director at Magnolia Plantation and Gardens near Charleston, South Carolina. He takes a very personal interest in this historic site and gardens. According to the plantation Web-site, he says: "Magnolia is one of the last large scale Romantic Gardens left in the United States. The Romantic Garden movement has its roots in the industrial revolution in Europe, and is tied directly to the empowerment of the common man. When he went to work in the factories, he wanted to design gardens that would help him forget the dreary life offered during the workday. I like to tell that the definition of a romantic garden is an "Extravagant Liar." Truly, this is what a romantic garden is designed to do, to "lie" you into forgetting the normality of everyday life. Romantic Gardens are designed to take the viewer to a place where emotion takes precedence over reason. Surprise awaits around every corner. Form, balance and symmetry are thrown to the wind and these gardens are designed to appeal directly to the soul." If you have any questions regarding the gardens, contact his Ask Tom link at [camelliaman@msn.com](mailto:camelliaman@msn.com). He is also president of the Rev. John Drayton Chapter of the ASA, and directed the 2014 ASA Convention in Charleston.