

Lafayette's Historic Azalea Trail Revival

By June Faul, Denise Lanclos, and Cheryl Perret—Lafayette, Louisiana

Once a beautiful springtime display that was a major tourist attraction in the 1930s, Lafayette's 20th century azalea trail has been revitalized. For locals, it had been an annual family pilgrimage to celebrate the start of spring. Residents along the trail sat on their porches and watched cars going by; children delighted in spotting out-of-state license plates and buses with tourists. It was a lovely, free, floral festival that was open to everyone. What could have happened?

By 2015, there was no printed trail map or brochure to be found, despite the facts that azaleas survive a human lifetime and much of the trail still had plentiful azaleas. A Google search for Lafayette's Azalea Trail did not yield much, as it turned out the last printed map was done on a typewriter! Just one magazine article about spring-time flora across Louisiana stated that Lafayette's Azalea Trail map was now pretty much of a "collector's item," but the author did list some general trail directions in text and offered to send a map if someone contacted him by email.

Enter Scenic Lafayette, a newly formed affiliate of Scenic America (comprised of a small number of civic-minded community activists), who were determined to have a greater impact on the community by stimulating civic pride and working toward a better visual natural and built community. Bringing back the azalea trail was just the right break-out project to show the community what could be done through coordinated efforts between government, nonprofits, and citizens. Without as much as a bank account to put money in, this group in its first year undertook a door to door campaign, conducted an azalea inventory, digitized a new map for internet downloading, and directed the planting of 200 donated azaleas in various public spaces. A "Classic Car Cruise" was organized to pay homage to the decades of self-directed driving tours along the trail and to thank the trail residents for being the inspiration for the rest of the community. Awards of "Best in Beautification" from the city/parish government, and the 2016 designation as an Azalea Society of America "Azalea City" (one of only 16 in the US) were received. In the second year of trail revitalization, Scenic Lafayette focused on encouraging economic impact and thus spearheaded an Azalea Trail Day which added a vintage costume bicycle ride to the previous year's cruise to encourage participation by millennials. There is also a partnership with a local bicycle rental company for visitors who do not bring their own bikes.

In this third year of revitalization, the Azalea Trail Committee of Scenic Lafayette continues to advocate for more azalea plantings to enhance Lafayette's visual beauty and to promote springtime tourism. The measure of its success? Having influenced the planting of over 700 new azaleas along the trail and thousands more across the region, and drawing folks to drive or bike the trail each spring.

Lafayette received the Azalea City Certification in 2016 by the Azalea Society of America. We are very proud of this

Notable along the trail are the following points of interest:

- Historic homes of Sterling Grove neighborhood
- Arts, entertainment, government, and restaurant district in Downtown Lafayette
- Exceptional Romanesque architecture of the Cathedral of St. John the Evangelist Catholic Church and its 500-year-old live oak
- Decades-old azaleas on St. Mary and Myrtle Place Boulevards
- University of Louisiana at Lafayette's museums and cypress swamp
- Mouton Gardens grand mall
- Oil Center medical, restaurant, and retail center
- Beautiful riverside homes of Bendel Gardens and Greenbriar neighborhoods
- 100-acre Moncus Park

and glad to share our beauty with our fellow countrymen and international visitors. The city is promoting including azaleas in their landscaping to businesses, public properties, and residences across the city. Our efforts to continue the beautiful colorful floral splendor that adorns our lush green landscapes of live oaks, cypress, pines, magnolias, and crepe myrtles is something very important to us.

Today, the Azalea Trail Committee of Scenic Lafayette continues to advocate for more azalea plantings to enhance Lafayette's visual beauty and to promote springtime tourism.

Year-round, the trail's home gardens and grand boulevards showcase stately live oaks, colorful crepe myrtles, giant southern magnolias, and native cypress. Keep your eyes open for the growing number of landscapes that highlight Louisiana native plants. Tourists can drive the trail easily by picking up a brochure of the map at the Lafayette Visitors Center and following the trail street signs as they drive along the trail or following the map online at Scenic Lafayette or Lafayette Travel. Bloom time is anywhere from February 23 to mid-March depending on the weather and climate. Ongoing revitalization efforts by the Scenic Lafayette/Azalea Trail Committee over the last several years are bringing the trail back to its former glory. The annual Classic Car Cruise & Bike Ride is in March each year to enjoy and promote the trail; next year's event is scheduled for March 9, 2019.

Consider visiting Lafayette in the spring next year to enjoy a floral Mardi Gras the week of March 5, 2019. We are the happiest city in America, serving world class food

Sights Along the Lafayette Azalea Trail



Photo Denise Lanclos

▲ Photo 1—Lafayette's City Flower is a Southern Indica fondly known as "The General Lafayette" in honor of the Marquis de Lafayette.



Photo Cheryl Perret

▲ Photo 2 — Mall Boulevard in Mouton Gardens.



Photo Denise Lanclos

◀ Photo 3—Mature Southern Indica azaleas 'George Tabor,' 'Judge Solomon', and 'Formosa' at the Ezell family home known as "Seven Oaks" on St. Mary Boulevard.

▼ Photo 4—Southern Indica 'Fuchsia', 'Red Formosa', and 'Pride of Mobile' azaleas planted by Kevin Gossen around live oaks outside his office window at Gossen Architects. He planted these to remind him of the azaleas planted by his grandmother that he enjoyed seeing outside his window as a child.

in our many restaurants, and have beautiful cultural music and art.

For more information about the Lafayette Azalea Trail, visit: www.azaleatrail.org or www.facebook.com/sceniclafayette.

Travel information can be found at www.LafayetteTravel.com. Please view pictures at www.Google.com/maps and www.azaleas.org/Azalea_Cities.

June Faul is a previous Lafayette Azalea Trail Chairperson. Cheryl Perret and Denise Richard Lanclos are current Co-chairpersons of the Lafayette Azalea Trail. All three are members of the Louisiana Chapter of the ASA.



Photo Kevin Gossen