

Public Gardens in the Era of COVID-19

Dr. David Creech—Nacogdoches, Texas

After many years working in China, often once or twice a year, I've made many friends at the Nanjing Botanical Garden. We use WeChat all the time (the way Chinese "Facebook", message, chat, video, talk, and pay for things). I was texting with one friend and colleague in China, Dr Jianfeng Hua, who was a visiting scientist here at Stephen F. Austin State University about two years ago. He's part of the *Taxodium* Improvement team of Professor Yin Yunlong. He's kind, brilliant, and was a wonderful addition to our team at the SFA Gardens. Since mid-January, COVID-19 has been a topic of much discussion, of course. I learned in early January there was a serious problem in Wuhan. Wuhan was sealed off, in a serious lock down. He wrote, "...one person gets it, whole family dies." While it took too long for the government to react (sound familiar?), it wasn't long before much of China was in a shelter-in-place mode. Like everyone else, Dr. Hua, his wife, and son Joey were in a stay-in-their-apartment mode for five weeks. By the way, a shelter-in-place in China is different than it is here in the USA. It's serious. Once every two days he was alerted by text that he could come down to the ground floor for grocery shopping and then back to the apartment he went. Temperatures were checked at their door twice a day by a PPE-clad nurse. Eventually, as infections diminished, the citizens of Nanjing were allowed to move about depending on the color of their WeChat QR code. Red, yellow, or green defined the degree of mobility based on their temperatures, where they were, where they had been, and who they had come close to. China is a GPS world.

Since mid-February, Dr. Hua has been worried about friends in Nacogdoches, my staff, and me. He wondered if what he was seeing on the news about America was true. Why so many people together? Why is no one wearing masks? Why is there so much traffic? I explained that Americans are very independent, and we don't like the government telling us what to do. I tried to explain that in the beginning our government's message was not very strong, that many thought



Photo David Creech

▲ Photo 1— Dr. Creech with appropriate mask for work in public gardens.

▼ Photo 2—Cautionary signage at bridge between the SFA Mast Arboretum and Ruby M. Mize Azalea Garden.



Photo David Creech

it was under control and it would maybe disappear on its own. We thought masks don't really prevent infections; they just prevent others from being infected if you have it. We know differently now.

At this writing, Nanjing has been case free for over 35 days. My friends there think, "We have starved the virus." Of course, they all agree it isn't over yet. There will be flare ups, setbacks, and new cases, but my Chinese friends are convinced they are winning the war. At this writing, the big problem is visitors from abroad and a recent 14-day you-pay-for-it quarantine is now the rule for visitors to the country. This ain't your average Texas rodeo, that's for sure.

After four flights to the East Coast for talks in early to mid-February, I returned to Nacogdoches and decided to clear my calendar. COVID-19 made its debut in the USA with the first documented case on January 15, 2020. By mid-February, it was on the move. Denial isn't a river in Egypt. This was serious.

Part of the calendar was our national Azalea Society convention and conference in Houston, Texas, March 12-14. By then, I concluded we would be heading into a train wreck. With so many of our attendees in the over-65 crowd and with most flying into Houston, it seemed like a recipe for disaster. I wanted to cancel. After many phone calls and emails, we did. Bart Brechter, Head of Gardens and Landscape Operations at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, gets an A+ for working with the Marriott Hotel and getting obligations of epic proportions off our bill. While we hated to cancel, we know now it was the wise thing to do.

Survey of Public Gardens

In early March, I surveyed university and public gardens in the South. For those ahead of the curve, there was a mix of responses, as shown below.

FOR STAFF

1. Stagger work entry times, lunch, and breaks to reduce interactions.
2. For clerical, sales, admissions, and other personnel who can work remotely, encourage it.
3. Eliminate lines to the time clock.
4. Close vending machines, water fountains, etc.
5. Recognize worker "choke points" and "bottlenecks" and eliminate them.
6. Design a system with workers working solo.
7. Communicate by text or group chats with workers rather than face-to-face.
8. Provide masks and sanitizers to all staff. (See Photo 1.)
9. Provide workers with written documents explaining how COVID-19 is infectious.
10. Recognize your compromised workers (diabetes, cardiopulmonary, age) and provide them with work assignments that include strong social distancing—or have them work remotely.



▲ Photo 3—*Rhododendron austrinum* 'Florida Flame' in full glory.

▼ Photo 4—*R.* 'Koromo Shikibu', seen in both the Ruby M. Mize and Gayla Mize Azalea Gardens.





Photo David Creech

▲ Photo 5—Sport of 'Koromo Shikibu' known locally as "Speckled Spider".

▼ Photo 6—Family visit to lonely garden with few visitors. Plenty of social distancing possible in public gardens for visitors.



Photo David Creech

11. Ban "common areas" like the break room or lunchrooms.
12. Allow workers to go directly from their homes to a work site.
13. Allow workers to have their own assigned ATV or truck – or allow workers to use their own vehicles to move about and compensate them for that.
14. Assign workers their own tools.
15. Assign workers sanitation duties in locations where workers might visit.
16. Recognize "friend or family units"—workers that live together can work together.

FOR VISITORS

(if gardens remain open to the public)

1. If there is admission via a single gate, close the garden or devise multiple entry points with good social distance opportunities.
2. Sign and interpret the garden to encourage visitors to maintain good social distance.
3. Close the bathrooms and turn off the water fountains and cover them so there's no question they're out of service.
4. For paths and trails that are narrow, encourage directional flow with signage. (See Photo 2.)
5. Flag off benches and seating to prevent usage.

For you ASA azalea enthusiasts, we're so sorry you missed the Texas experience. Some of you were going to catch our gardens in Nacogdoches on the way in. We were looking forward to it. It's a downright eerie experience to see it now. It's quiet, totally beautiful, and there's a plant surprise around every corner. All we lack is people. (See Photos 3-6.) Cancelling the SFA Gardens spring plant sale, seminars, workshops, summer camps, and the environmental education program means a dramatic loss of income. That outside-the-university funding is critical for staff salaries, so we have a new challenge. That said, I'm convinced we'll survive. It's a public garden. In these trying times, the value of having such a beautiful and outdoor learning environment, one that's safe, beautiful, and healthy for our visitors, is difficult to measure. I think it's priceless. Until next time, please stay safe—and let's keep planting.

Dr. David Creech is Director SFA Gardens, Regents Professor of Horticulture, and Professor Emeritus of Horticulture at Stephen F. Austin State University in Nacogdoches, Texas. He began his work at SFA in 1978, developed over 100 acres of the SFA Mast Arboretum and Pineywoods Native Plant Center gardens and still oversees all aspects of their operation, including on-campus and regional cooperative research projects with kiwifruit. He is Texas Chapter President and assisted in two other Texas ASA conventions (2007, 2015).