

# The Houston Convention That Wasn't

*Joanne Neckel—Fairfax Station Virginia*

**D**an and I were so looking forward to the Houston 2020 Azalea Society Convention. We were excited to experience Houston's early blooming season and decided to begin our trip by visiting Galveston for a few days prior to the start of the convention.

We flew from DC to Houston, picked up our rental car, drove to Galveston and checked into our hotel overlooking the Gulf of Mexico. It was only then that I checked my email and discovered that the convention had been canceled. After dealing with airline and hotel, we decided to stick to our original itinerary and do the convention ourselves, keeping in mind all the social distancing recommendations.

Galveston's top attraction is Moody Gardens, a 242-acre complex that features an aquarium, rainforest, paddlewheel boat, gardens, and waterpark area. The complex did not have much garden area, but the rainforest contained greenery and colorful plants. (See Photo 1.) Galveston is filled with gingerbread homes and small, cute gardens, but we could only find one yard containing azaleas. (See Photo 2.)

One colorful spot in Galveston was the Bryan Museum which featured original art and artifacts related to Texas history and the American West. The conservatory and gardens had a decent collection of blooming azaleas which were not past peak. The grounds are used for weddings and social events. (See Photo 3.)

On Thursday we intended to visit the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo before checking into the Marriott Hotel, but the show got canceled—first time in 88 years! We were warmly greeted by the hotel staff and received top notch attention, since the hotel was only 30% occupied! Instead we got a cab and headed to The Museum of Fine Arts Houston and The Houston Museum of Natural Science where we did see some blooming azaleas.

Our cab driver turned out to be a jewel. We used him exclusively for the remainder of our trip. Having lived in



▲ Photo 1—Flower in Galveston's Moody Gardens Rainforest.

▼ Photo 2—Blooming azalea in private garden in Galveston.







Photo Joanne Neckel

▲ Photo 3— Azaleas at Bryan Museum, Galveston.



Photo Joanne Neckel

▲ Photo 4— Blooming Kurume Azaleas in the Butterfly Garden at Bayou Bend Fine Arts and Gardens, Houston.

▼ Photo 5—Formal Garden with azaleas in trimmed boxwoods at Bayou Bend.

▼ Photo 6—Pericat Hybrid 'Sweetheart Supreme' blooming at Bayou Bend..



Photo Joanne Neckel



Photo Joanne Neckel

Houston for over 40 years, he took us to many gardens and parks we probably would have missed on our own. He drove us around the River Oaks Garden area where we could get a glimpse of the beautiful homes, most of which were behind gates and heavy landscaping. We caught bursts of color along the drive.

On Friday we toured Bayou Bend Fine Arts Collection and Gardens, which were on the original convention tour. (See Photo 4.) The home is a museum containing an outstanding collection of American decorative arts and paintings. It was owned by Houston civic leader and philanthropist Ima Hogg

and sits on 14 acres of organically maintained gardens. We missed peak blooms but did find a few azaleas among the formal boxwoods. (See Photo 5.) 'Sweetheart Supreme' and 'Coral Bells' were the most common varieties. (See Photos 6 & 7.)

Ima Hogg established the Houston Symphony Orchestra, and her garden reflects a "musical" theme. The boxwood hedges are shaped into musical notes and even the patio furniture reflects the musical theme. (See Photos 8 & 9.)

From Bayou Bend you can take a wooded path to Rienzi, a house museum for European decorative arts situated on





Photo Joanne Neckel

▲ Photo 7— Kurume hybrid 'Coral Bells' blooming at Bayou Bend.

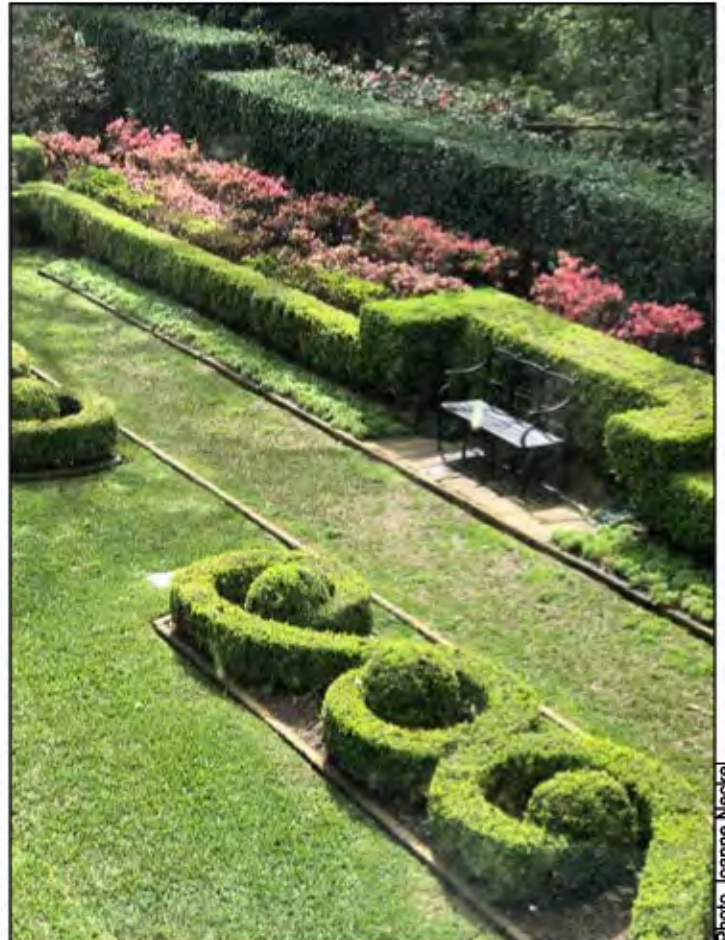


Photo Joanne Neckel

▲ Photo 8— Boxwood hedges and azaleas in Ima Hogg's side terrace at Bayou Bend.

▼ Photo 9—Ima Hogg's musical interest shown in the design of chairs on the side terrace.

four acres of gardens that was also on the convention tour. We did not tour the museum but took a stroll around the wooded gardens—no blooming azaleas in sight but spotted some tulips.

On Saturday we intended on touring the Houston Zoo (good outdoor activity), but it also was closed. We opted for the Johnson Space Center—the only flowers were outside the visitor's entrance.

Even though the convention was canceled, we made "lemonade from lemons". Every site we visited had plenty of sanitizers, and we attempted social distancing. After landing at Reagan Airport in DC, my son texted that he was not picking us up but would send an Uber instead. He did not want our Houston germs! Sign of the times.

Joanne Neckel originally joined the American Rhododendron Society about 15 years ago. After attending more activities with ARS, she realized many of the members also belonged to the Azalea Society of America, so she joined the ASA. She has attended both ARS and ASA conventions and volunteered at their various activities. She is currently secretary of the Northern Virginia chapter of ASA.

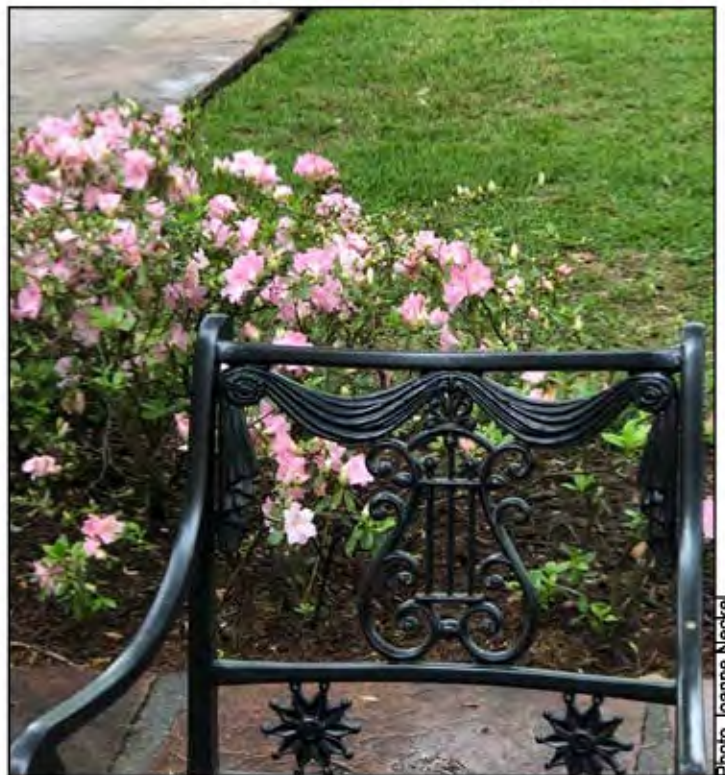


Photo Joanne Neckel