

Kinney Azalea Gardens, Rhode Island—Part 2

By Dr. Susan Gordon—Kingston, Rhode Island

[Editor's Note: This is part two of a two-part series. See Part 1 in the Winter 2020 issue.]

Correction: The captions on photos 3 and 4 of first part of this article in the Winter issue were reversed.]

Next Generation Ownership

Lorenzo became quite ill in 1993. His daughter Betty (Elizabeth Kinney) and son-in-law Tony Faella largely gave up their own home to help care for him. On his passing, the mantle of garden ownership was placed on them. Tony and Betty Faella were educators, not horticulturalists. But they had always been there to pitch in—doing the books and accounting, helping with storm clean-ups, designing and building picturesque bridges to span seasonal streams—and much more. Tony's expert and thoughtful mowing defines beds and makes the entire garden feel welcoming.

In 1995, the Faellas added nine acres to the garden. This acquisition brought the garden to a new level. A true feeling of spaciousness and sense of place ensued. I remember distinctly, standing in the kitchen with them, and asking what is the first thing you'd like to see on the new land? Their response, "a Moon Gate." The next evening, I was at a RI Nursery & Landscape Assoc. meeting. John Manchester, a long-time friend, sat across the table. To say John is a local landscape architect and stone mason, is akin to describing Neil deGrasse Tyson as an astrology professor at Harvard.

I asked John if he'd ever made a Moon Gate. He replied, "No, but I'd like to." I asked what it would cost for the design. He held up his cocktail napkin and said, "I just did it." A design consultation and a watercolor rendition later, Tony said, "Build it!" and John did. The Moon Gate was completed for Tony's 75th birthday. It has become the garden's focal point and trademark. (*See Photo 5.*)

My Role in the Garden

Lorenzo hired high school kids to help with the gardens. In 1976, he hired a skinny, stubborn 16-year-old to take over propagation, as well as general help with the gardens. She is the author of this article. She had grown up on a nearby wholesale/retail nursery. Her father was a consummate horticulturalist and ingenious to boot. She learned how to dig, stitch, and drum lace (tie inter-connected ropes around large root balls for transport) from him, as well as to water trees using 100-gal drums and hoses. No irrigation; just suck on the hose, and hope no one was living in it.

That was over 40 years ago. In retrospect, she was another person, so I'll switch to the first person now.

Within a few years, Lorenzo treated me more as a peer and partner. I remember being incredibly excited when, together, we picked out new cultivars from the Roslyn Nursery catalogue. Soon I was going on trips with him. Meeting the likes of Caroline Gable, Everett Hershey, and Fred Galle. We made many evening trips to the Connecticut Rhododendron Society spring truss shows. It was on those evening drives, two hours each way, that he shared many stories about other plantsmen, and the history he'd lived through.

I had close to *carte blanche* in planting and landscape design, as well as hiring and overseeing other employees. Our extensive woodland trail system is the result of my desperation (*See Photo 6.*). I had plants to line out and I was out of room! Lorenzo Jr.'s criticism was rare, but cutting. A big error would result in "Well Sue, did you think you were going to college?"

After college, I largely ran the gardens. Like many collectors, as plants got big or numerous, Lorenzo would sell some. With my nursery back-

Tenets in the garden's design have always included:

- Maintain intersecting loops of dirt roads, allowing vehicular access, although it's a stroll garden.
- Include large swaths of lawn, allowing for romantic vistas as well as giving humans access and places for passive recreation.
- Make the view from the dining room's picture window exceptional and a priority.
- Extend the garden's season of appeal.
- Add color! Lorenzo, his heirs, and the author, all love color, but include white in almost every planting.

ground, I felt strongly the gardens should support themselves via sales. We sell small plants retail to visitors, etc. But over the years, our niche has become evident. We now also sell large/specimen material to landscape architects, contractors, estates, and arboreta.

The one area in the garden where I started with an actual design goal is Galle's Footsteps. Usually the landscape, or some element, informs the planting layout. Galle's Footsteps is, with the exception of the area and plantings surrounding the Moon Gate, the first planting completed in the Faellas' newest land parcel.

On Fred Galle's passing, I wished to honor his legacy. Each of the five footstep-shaped beds in this area contain plants created by a single hybridizer. The thought was to suggest how, in horticulture, we learn from and build on others' work. The funny part of the story is, just as it was completed, Fred's niece and nephew asked if I would consider adding a northern tribute to him in the gardens. I don't remember exactly what was said,

but the gist of it was "I just did."

The gardens have changed a good deal in the last 40 years. We're not completely organic, but darn close. We don't use any insecticides. We don't remove leaf litter and allow many fallen logs to remain. By doing this, having native trees for canopy species, and leaving as many native forbs* and shrubs as possible, we encourage (and cherish!) the local biodiversity. The result is a lot of breeding songbirds, and a good bio-control system.

A Debt of Gratitude

The Faellas' contributions to the gardens are innumerable. From my perspective, the biggest is their love of people and the hospitality and joy with which they welcome everyone.

Lorenzo's shoulders may have been deemed too thin to withstand serving in WWI, but he was the giant upon whose shoulders the rest of us stood to create the Kinney Azalea Gardens.

Photo 5: The Moon Gate. Photo by Lorna Wright.



To Visit Kinney Azalea Gardens

The gardens are open daylight hours (dawn till dusk), every day.

They are supported by donations and the sale of plant materials.

- Online:
Kinneyazaleagardens.com and on Facebook
- Physical Address:
2391 Kingstown Rd., Kingston, RI 02881

About the Author:

Dr. Susan Gordon has been the horticulturalist and manager of the Kinney Azalea Gardens since 1976. In addition to spending time with her three dogs, she was an adjunct professor at URI for 35 years. She is a past president of the RI Nursery & Landscape Association (RINLA) and chaired their education program for 30 years. She has written chapters of their certification manual as well as that of RI's Coastal Resource Management Council. She continues to write and lecture for RINLA and other groups. Susan can be reached at sgordonkinney@gmail.com or at (401)782-8847.

*A forb is any non-woody flowering plant that is not a grass. The word is derived from Greek meaning pasture or fodder.



Photo 6: A dirt road, leading to the woodland trails. The large pink azalea in the foreground is the Glenn Dale 'Dawning'. Photo by Lorna Wright.

The Kinney Azalea Gardens brochure and map.

Welcome to the Kinney Azalea Gardens! We hope you will enjoy the many varieties of azaleas growing in the Gardens. Please proceed at your own risk. Start at the entrance marker - a 100th birthday present to Mr. Kinney. Pause often to look around you, to take in the many vistas which are carefully planned so that the gardens look different from every direction. Take time to look at all of the plants, as there are also rhododendrons and many other shrubs, trees, wild flowers and specimen evergreens. Enter the new back area through the stone Moon Gate, built in honor of Tony Faella's 75th birthday.

Explore the small paths on the map which provide a variety of experiences for visitors of all ages. Take the Dogwood Trail to the white dogwood tree, look at the wild flowers in Wildflower Walk, see the leucothoe plants in Leucothoe Loop, and the pepperbush at Pepperbush Point.

Mostly you will see azaleas - from the small plants just getting started to the older, larger plants from 5 to 60 years old. Can you find the "pixie" and Pixie azalea along Pixie Path? You will find Geisha azaleas near Hemlock Square. Notice the pink and white flowers on the same branch! Spruce Square shelters flowering plants beneath giant evergreens. Mr. Kinney's own varieties, The Kinney hybrids, are found on the K Path. Nearby are Japanese umbrella pines and yellow and orange deciduous azaleas. Take Bridge Way over the wooden bridge to another part of the gardens. Enjoy the Circle Path, Catalpa Corner and Azalea Park on the way to Jungle Trail. Jungle Trail has bamboo and other unusual plants. Godzilla Bend has "real" (but tiny) monsters hiding in an evergreen tree.

Paul's Path is named in memory of Paul Santer. Paul and his fellow intern, Philip Thibaudeau, designed and established this path in 1995. Galle's Footsteps honors the late Fred C. Galle, friend of Mr. Kinney, and authority on azaleas and hollies. Today's hybridizers rely on Galle's texts.

Come often, relax and enjoy the paths and flowers!



Azalea 'Lorenzo Kinney'
— the name is not yet
officially registered.
Photo by Lorna Wright.