

America's Foreign Country: The Atchafalaya National Heritage Area

By Caroline S. Byrne—Baton Rouge, Louisiana

The Atchafalaya National Heritage Area is wild and mysterious. It is made up of a large variety of habitats from swamps, wetlands, and bayous to prairies and North America's only land-building river delta. Housed in Louisiana's Office of Cultural Development, the Atchafalaya National Heritage Area works to preserve and promote the cultural, historic, and natural resources of the Atchafalaya basin and floodway. The welcome center is about 20 miles east of Lafayette. The protected area stretches from the Old River Control Structure in Concordia Parish all the way down to the Gulf of Mexico in Terrebonne Parish, and from Avoyelles to Lafayette and East Baton Rouge. The Louisiana French dialects and heritage, coupled with the unique ecosystems throughout the heritage area, are just a few things that make the region so special.

Atchafalaya residents and natives have used the flora and fauna native to these habitats in food, medicine, and more throughout history. The Acadiana Native Plant Project is one such organization working to preserve Louisiana's native plants and promote their uniqueness and uses.

Ecosystems, especially those that make up the Atchafalaya National Heritage Area, are complex. Especially with the way humans have adapted to disaster and changed the land, preserving ecosystems has become a crucial way to protect against destructive environmental forces. A hallmark of the Atchafalaya National Heritage Area is our relationship with water, and native plants have served protection and adaptation purposes throughout history. For example, indigenous peoples used river cane to weave baskets and also used native seeds and berries for dye, while early colonists insulated their homes with spanish moss. Sassafras (*Sassafras albidum*) leaves are ground into filé powder to flavor and thicken gumbo. American elderberry (*Sambucus canadensis*) is harvested and processed for healing tinctures. Cultures throughout Acadiana have used a wide variety of native plant life for medicinal purposes.

The Acadiana Native Plant Project (ANPP) exists to promote the use of native plants in Louisiana landscapes. The group propagates native plant species in the spring and educates visitors through virtual tours and workshops. ANPP also admin-

isters the Louisiana Certified Habitat Program for southwest Louisiana. The program invites Louisiana residents, businesses, schools and other public entities to use their outdoor space to create a native habitat.

The program further emphasizes the importance of using native plants that serve as the foundation for all habitat types and natural ecosystems. They also provide shelter and food for native wildlife.

So, what is a native plant? The Acadiana Native Plant Project defines native plants as those already growing in the Acadiana region before the arrival of Europeans. The rattlesnake master (*Eryngium yuccifolium*), for example, has grown in Louisiana's coastal prairie for millenia. Its existence supports native bee pollinators and indigenous peoples used it to create a fiber for shoes. Other plants native to Louisiana include the box elder (*Acer negundo*), the indigo bush (*Amorpha fruticosa*), the trumpet creeper (*Campsis radicans*), and the flowering dogwood (*Cornus florida*).

The Acadiana Native Plant Project's website, www.greauxnative.org, includes recommendations for Louisiana native landscaping plants. The "Instead of That Plant This" documents offer explanations and suggestions for native plant replacements to popular non-natives. Instead of Chinese wisteria (*Wisteria sinensis*), introduced into the U.S. from China in 1816 and displacing native plants ever since, gardeners can plant American wisteria (*Wisteria frutescens*), a native, non-aggressive deciduous vine with fragrant blue flowers. In place of crape myrtles (*Lagerstroemia* sp.), which are vulnerable to mildew, sooty mold, and aphids, landscapers can plant rusty blackhaw viburnum (*Viburnum prunifolium*), which is native and has striking fall colors. Native azaleas, sometimes called honeysuckle or flame azaleas, come in white, pink, orange, yellow, and red. All these changes help enhance Louisiana's ecosystem and the wildlife that make the state so unique.

Non-natives, also known as "introduced" plants, came to the United States from other parts of the world as people settled the area. These settlers brought their favorite food, medicinal, and household plants along with them. Such plants were bred with desirable characteristics including beauty, and are often found in landscaping. Non-



Atchafalaya

NATIONAL HERITAGE AREA



Lake Martin, Louisiana. Photo courtesy of Atchafalaya National Heritage Area.

natives include roses, azaleas, and crape myrtles, and though they provide little regarding ecosystem services, they are long-lived and beautiful.

The Azalea Trail in Lafayette is one way to take in these beautiful non-natives. It also offers a prime opportunity to explore historic downtown Lafayette, the Oil Center, and the University districts and garden neighborhoods. The Azalea Trail spans approximately 25 miles through Lafayette’s urban core. These azaleas bloom three times a year, but the best time to catch them is from late February through March. Christened “The General Lafayette” in honor of the Marquis de Lafayette,

the Southern Indian lavender ‘Formosum’ azalea was named Lafayette’s official city flower in the 1950s.

For more information on Lafayette’s Azalea Trail, visit www.azaleatrail.org. Learn more about the Atchafalaya National Heritage Area at www.atchafalaya.org. To learn more about native plant species and receive gardening advice, visit www.greauxnative.org.

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