

In Memoriam: Ernest Koone

By Tom Johnson—Hamilton, Georgia

Ernest Franklin Koone was born in LaGrange, Georgia, and lived on the family farm outside of Pine Mountain, adjacent to Callaway Gardens. The family moved near Atlanta, Georgia, in 1957 where he completed his education, including his study at many local gardens. His summers and weekends were spent at the farm, first begun by his ancestors in 1827, learning and developing a love for horticulture and native shrubs.

After serving in the U.S. Navy from 1972-1984, he returned to Pine Mountain and joined Lazy K, his father's nursery business, eventually turning it into the largest grower of native azaleas—distributing over 100,000 native azaleas each year.

In recent years, he could barely keep up with the demand. Ernest was a “hands-on” nurseryman, maintaining his large business with only a small number of long-time loyal employees. He even made most of his own truck deliveries. He considered people like Virginia Hand Callaway, Fred Galle, and President and Mrs. Carter his friends. He was a recognized authority on native azaleas by many prestigious gardens and donated his knowledge, time, experience, and plants to many public gardens and gardening organizations. Ernest was active in several horticultural groups and was a board member of the Rosalyn Carter's Butterfly Trail.

I met Ernest over 30 years ago. Like most who have ever met Ernest, we became instant friends. Ernest was the type of person that made you feel important and was always willing to give of himself to help others. He donated native azalea collections to many gardens around the country. Throughout my tenure at Magnolia Gardens, Ernest supplied us with plants to sell, along with driving to Charleston anytime we needed a program on native plants. We put on two national conventions there and Ernest was always the first person I would call.

He always agreed to teaching a class. He would show up with a load of native plants and donate them for our club to sell. During the conventions, he was always working behind the scenes to help anyway he could.

Magnolia Gardens was the first garden in the United States approved to receive interns from Versailles. Later, Barbados sent interns too. I wanted the students to tour southern public gardens and meet some American nurserymen. Once again, Ernest was the first I called. In the early days, before his mother passed away, she would meet Ernest and the students at Callaway Gardens with a picnic lunch. Mrs. Koone would have a large meal prepared in the trunk of her car. We

Ernest Koone collecting native azalea seeds. Photo by Tom Johnson.



would eat at the overlook pavilion near the Old Azalea Bowl. It became an annual ritual to take the students to Lazy K Nursery. Ernest would talk with them about operating a nursery and then he would give them a personal tour of Callaway Gardens, sharing with them personal stories about Fred Galle and many other important figures in American horticulture that he personally knew. I remember thinking back then how casual the stories he told about the great horticultural names I had only heard about in my career. Funny, now I think back. Once the students returned home, I received a copy of their reports about the program. They would always mention getting to meet the “Great American Nurseryman” Ernest Koone.

Ernest donated native azalea collections to two public gardens a year. He donated plants to many clubs. He primarily sold one-gallon plants because that was easier for small clubs to sell and he wanted to help them. I think that was one of his biggest legacies!

Ernest Koone’s remarkable legacy includes the distribution of millions of native azaleas, many now preserved at gardens in the United States including Longwood, the U.S. National Arboretum, Callaway Gardens, the Atlanta Botanical Garden, the Atlanta Beltline Arboretum, Lockerly Arboretum, Hamilton Gardens at Lake Chatuge, Olmsted Linear Park, Magnolia Plantation and Gardens, and Auburn University.

Among his many accomplishments, Ernest was awarded the Distinguished Service Award by the Azalea Society of America. Ernest told me, of all the honors he had received, this was the one he was most proud of!

He named native azalea cultivars, including *Rhododendron canescens* ‘Chocolate Drop’, *R. flammeum* ‘Red Inferno’, *R. alabamense* ‘Nancy Callaway’, *R. austrinum* ‘Olde Gold’, *R. arborecens* (var. *georgiana*) ‘Pink Satin’, *R. viscosum*



Ernest meeting with visiting interns. Photos by Tom Johnson.



‘White Foam’, *R. viscosum* var. *serrulatum* ‘White Pearl’.

He also named a native azalea for former First Lady Rosalynn Carter, and President Carter, but he would only grow them to be donated and sold to benefit the Rosalynn Carter Butterfly Trail. Money and fame never seemed to be important to my friend, Ernest. He was too busy just being a simple plantsman!



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