



The Jungle Gardens of Avery Island

By Katlyn Decou—Avery Island, Louisiana

[Editor's Note: This article is the fifth in a series of preview pieces for the Azalea Society of America's Annual Meeting in March 2022.]

Avery Island's Jungle Gardens, home of world-famous TABASCO® brand Pepper Sauce, is located near New Iberia, Louisiana. It is one of the most attractive natural places one could ever visit. The idea of E. A. McIlhenny, the gardens began over a century ago. Initially, it was a wildlife refuge for the snowy egret and only later a working plant nursery.

By the early 1920s, McIlhenny's greenhouses, lath houses, and nursery brimmed with unusual decorative and functional plants. He specialized primarily in four groups: azaleas, bamboos, camellias, and hollies. In 1926, he formally organized Jungle Gardens as Jungle Gardens Inc. The company's purpose was to conduct general nursery business, which included propagation of plants and nursery stock, landscape gardening, and buying and selling at retail and wholesale of things he

produced, including cut flowers.

McIlhenny's nursery stock at its incorporation was enormous. At one time, Jungle Gardens, Inc. grew plants in the tens of thousands and boasted 6,000 acres of land, some on Avery Island, some off. Today, Jungle Gardens no longer operates as a nursery. It occupies some 175 acres on Avery Island, which includes the famous Bird City wildfowl refuge and the "Old Nursery" that served as McIlhenny's experimental plots and exhibition gardens. In addition to selling plants, McIlhenny was the recipient of early USDA plant introductions. Countless numbers of species imported into the U.S. primarily from Asia, including from China and Japan, were sent to Avery Island as trials. Many of these introductions survived and continue to thrive today.

The gardens were opened to the public in 1935 as a drive-through attraction, appealing to both local visitors as well as to those traveling the U.S. Paths and walkways wind through the property, enabling visitors to enjoy the many hidden splen-

dors of this unique landmark. A prominent garden director, who visited Jungle Gardens in 2018, commented at the end of his tour, “Seeing Jungle Gardens was like visiting a garden I expected to see 100 years ago.” Jungle Gardens is a timeless place. Little has changed in the past century other than the ages of the plants growing there.

For most of the 20th century, Jungle Gardens and Avery Island were thought to have the largest collections of bamboo. McIlhenny embraced bamboo as a potentially valuable commodity. He believed that both timber bamboo and edible shoot bamboo would be useful to Louisiana’s economy, and planted more than 64 varieties in and around Jungle Gardens. At the time, McIlhenny was the nation’s only commercial bamboo grower and he sold many species successfully. Although the U.S. bamboo industry never flourished, McIlhenny’s ability to see bamboo’s potential, and his success with a number of productive varieties, astonished experts. Several bamboo types still flourish in Jungle Gardens. The more interesting of these surviving varieties include a giant yellow bamboo with pale green stripes called ‘Robert Young’, located just before the Camellia Study Garden; impressively large ‘Moso’ and ‘Henon’ bamboos, found in a pretty grove near Bird City; and a small patch of ‘Meyerii’ bamboo, which is quite tall and often very dark, almost black, growing to the left of the old entrance gate.

Camellias were fabulously popular in mid-19th-century Europe. Admired by celebrities and aristocrats, many varieties were considered essential for the chic gardens of south Louisiana plantation owners. As a result, antebellum planters imported camellias from France to enhance both their gardens and their reputations. Although the Civil War put an end to extravagant gardening, many of the camellias continued to thrive on their own in the region’s rich soil and semitropical climate.

While visiting old plantation gardens along



Pictured on opposite page, Southern live oak skirted by azaleas. Pictured above, Encore® azalea ‘Conled’ which is marketed under Autumn Coral®, its registered trademark name.

Bayou Teche, young McIlhenny rediscovered the forgotten and now less-fashionable camellias. Around 1900, he began to collect camellias and by 1902 he possessed more than 100 varieties in Jungle Gardens. In the following decades he continued to import camellias from Europe and Japan as well as breed them to produce new varieties.

In 1950, a year after his death, the nursery published a camellia catalog that offered 251 camellia varieties—many of which originated in Jungle Gardens. Nursery sales ended around 1952. The camellias that remained in Jungle Gardens were essentially abandoned, but continued to thrive untended. Fields of camellias were allowed to return to natural forests. Today thousands of camellias persist in those mature woodlands. They not only thrived but continued to reproduce on their own. In 2018, a walking trail was cut through the camellia-forested area of the Old Nursery. The lovely trails take visitors on a never-before-seen trip through that abandoned nursery.

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All photos are by Pam McIlhenny. Text by Katlyn Decou, Marketing Coordinator of the McIlhenny Company. Staff botanist Garrie Landry contributed to this article.

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