

# Azalea Gardens

[Both the Coleman and Sommerville gardens will be on tour during the Atlanta convention in 2002, jointly sponsored by the Azalea Society of America and the American Rhododendron Society. Visit the website dedicated to the 2002 convention at [www.arsazalea.tripod.com](http://www.arsazalea.tripod.com).]

## The Coleman Garden

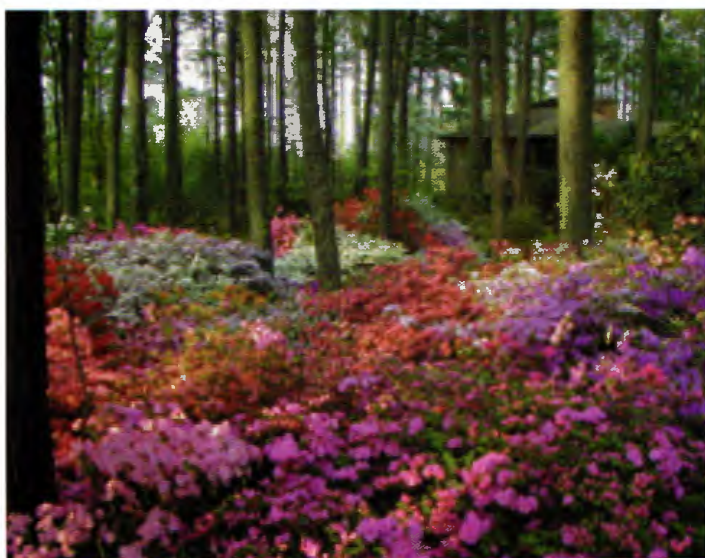
Joe and Donna Coleman — Lithonia, Georgia

On the east side of Atlanta, by the Yellow River, our garden continues to grow and evolve, reflecting the changing paradigm of the modern landscape. Most of us buy a house, then at some point get around to thinking about a garden. But in 1980, when we bought our wooded ten-acre parcel near Lithonia, Georgia, the landscape was the number one priority. After several years, our ordinary suburban

friends, new sources for evergreen azaleas were found at Covington Nursery, just at the time Ralph Pennington was selling his nursery, and so many plants were being dispersed. It was a mind-expanding experience to find a source for hundreds of Glenn Dale, Gable, Kurume, Back Acres, and other azaleas. It was wonderful! More azaleas equaled less lawn. Unfortunately, there are limits

population. One enterprising real estate agent even pointed out the empty holes at the entrance to a gated community where plants had been liberated! So much for part time gardening in the mountains!

A search closer to home resulted in the purchase of 10 wooded acres along the Yellow River in eastern DeKalb County. At one time the property had



The garden of Joe and Donna Coleman is a wonderland of color in the spring, as shown here by their collection of Kurume azaleas. (Image by Joe Coleman.)



As they mature over the years, the azaleas have developed seedling crosses naturally. This row shows the variation that occurred when R. 'Mildred' crossed with R. 'Dainty'. (Image by Joe Coleman.)

home in Stone Mountain with its usual foundation plantings and lawn had gradually been filled up. The problem was I hated to mow grass. In an effort to cut down on this tedious chore, I began expanding pine islands and filling in these shady areas with evergreen azaleas. No one said they would be addictive, though!

Having acquired all the normal evergreen azalea varieties from local nurseries, we joined the ARS in 1976 at the time the Azalea Chapter was being revitalized. In meeting new

even to a neighborhood lot.

For several years in the late 1970s, a cabin in the north Georgia mountains seemed the perfect answer. A weekend retreat with no telephone, no red clay, no grass, and the bonus of fragrant native azaleas was a "no brainer." That is, until we realized that weekend retreats meant being stuck in traffic every Sunday evening with all the holiday lake inhabitants, having an empty, unguarded residence five days a week, and providing free meals for the north Georgia deer

been farmed. In fact, the entire surrounding area was filled with a number of small farms, which over the years had been abandoned due to poor or exhausted soil. Due to extensive granite outcroppings, the suburban invasion was delayed in this area. New subdivisions have only recently been built.

Although the land had been terraced for farming, over the years it had been allowed to return to a natural state with a full canopy, primarily of pines and water oaks, interspersed

with white oaks, southern red oaks, sassafras, dogwoods, elms, and hickories. Soil testing revealed that due to the porous nature of the soil, it was deficient in every nutrient—you could fertilize to your heart's content. Unfortunately, there were no native azaleas or desirable native wildflowers. We did have superior forms of poison ivy, Virginia creeper, honeysuckle, wild grape vines, smilax, cut thorns, blackberry brambles, and other undesirables. The only undesirable plant we didn't have was kudzu, and it was up the hill heading our way.

Because we found enough land, high shade, and at that time, water, the property was purchased and the house completed in July 1980, just in time for the heat wave of the century. Having propagated azaleas for the move, we had to wait until late October for the first plants to hit the soil. But as time revealed, a bobcat does a lousy job of digging smilax bulbs, and wild grape vines in trees took time to clear. Persistent spraying was found to kill poison ivy, but only with constant vigilance. Twenty years after the fact, weeding is still a constant battle, even in mature beds.

Over the years, the original garden has grown as the watering system has expanded in all directions. It now encompasses some five acres of mature plantings of more than 4,000 evergreen and deciduous azaleas, 2,000 rhododendrons and over 100 varieties of Japanese maples. By the time you sprinkle in viburnums, camellias, laurels, hostas, perennials, and wildflowers, you have the makings of a woodland garden made for wandering. This is what the Coleman garden is all about—take any path and go discover!

The curse of being a plant collector is that you want all of them and you'll never be able to find a source for them all. A landscaper's nightmare is a collection of plants, one of every variety that he must blend into a perfect schematic design. Having accepted that impossibility a long time ago, we placed loose groups of hybrids

throughout the garden. While the main plantings of Dexter rhododendron and Robin Hill azaleas are at the front of the house, don't be surprised to find favorites throughout the garden. Some plants were grouped by colors, others by hybridizer; still others were placed because they were perfect for a particular hole.

National conventions can also complicate life unduly. Attending the 1979 convention in Vancouver I fell in love with yaks (*Rhododendron yakushimanum*). No one said you had to wait five years for the plants to adapt to our native conditions in order to bloom. Even then, they were not equal to the plants in the Northwest. In 1980, Cape Cod revealed the Dexter rhododendrons and the next search was on. Conventions can always surprise: attending the 1998 Azalea Society of America Convention in northern Virginia, I discovered Pete Vines' group of evergreen azalea hybrids, the Holly Springs, which were totally new to me. Another new search began. I also rediscovered the breadth of the original Glenn Dale collection. Long after I thought I had the best that Ben Morrison produced, I found I was wrong. The search for a few elusive Glenn Dales will go on for quite some time.

No garden is a static place, particularly with the vicissitudes of nature. Windstorms, blizzards, and pine bark beetles continually thin the forest canopy. Although it seemed disastrous at the time, this does allow for better flower bud production. The reduced rainfall, particularly these last 10 years is another matter entirely. With the first county water restrictions, a pump was put in the Yellow River and the irrigation lines were changed from county water to river water. The river has only once dropped too low to irrigate—but those six weeks without water in August and September did considerable damage to new plantings and established rhododendrons. Continued drought restrictions have made it tough to introduce new rhododendrons to the garden. Grouping pots

together to keep them watered may be a necessity, but I would prefer to have the plants in the ground. The established native deciduous azaleas have gone through the drought without a hint of disturbance. Even in the wild they have bloomed well and continue to grow when other plant material has struggled or faded completely.

Often underneath the shrubs can be found the jewels of the garden: native wildflowers. Pink lady slippers planted in one section have naturalized in several areas showing a distinct preference for pine straw pathways. Trilliums can now be encountered on every level; beds of *Iris cristata*, *Chrysogonum* 'Eco Lacquer Spider', and *Sarcococca* mat out in all directions. Christmas rose (hellebore) drifts towards some paths as jack-in-the-pulpits take over others. Pockets of bloodroot and oriental bloodroot have taken over banks. Epimediums at least stay in their places. Selaginella (rainbow or peacock moss) thrives in shade covering the mulch layer of a granite outcropping. Heucheras and tiarellas border numerous paths. Bleeding heart has bled all over the front yard.

Japanese maples are a favorite accent plant in the garden. In spring and fall, their leaf color highlights the seasonal changes. A multitude of dwarf and dissectum forms line the paths, while larger palmatums are scattered on every level. We have to pull numerous small seedlings out of beds and paths around the more established plants, just to keep from being inundated with maples. Their bright colors in spring accentuate the colors of azalea and rhododendron flowers, but the fall coloring is a priceless bonus. Special favorites include: the old standards *Acer palmatum* 'Crimson Queen' and *A. p.* 'Viridis', dwarfs like *A. p.* 'Kiyohime' and *A. p.* 'Koshime', and *A. p.* 'Octopus' and *A. p.* 'Waterfall'.

Seedlings have not been neglected either. Several beds of rhododendron, evergreen azalea, and deciduous azalea seedlings are located above the

driveway. *Rhododendron* 'The Hon. Jean Marie de Montague' x 'Etta Burrows' has yielded a series of good reds and a series of cream to yellow rhododendron from the cross *R.* 'Dumpers Yellow' x *R.* 'Phipps 32' is being evaluated. This far south, any growable yellow rhododendron should be named "in your dreams." *R.* 'Marchioness of Lansdowne' x *R.* 'Ruby Bowman' has produced some interesting lavenders. *R.* 'Red Slippers' x *R.* 'Mother's Day' did not render a single scarlet, but did produce a beautiful rose, a circular orange/red blotch, even a bicolor. *R.* 'Mildred' x *R.* 'Dainty' produced a wide range of colors including a translucent white called *R.* 'Whiteout', and *R.* 'Glacier' x *R.* 'Red Slippers' produced a wide range of pinks to light roses, and there is also a potpourri of native azalea crosses.

The newest area of the garden to be developed is the riverbank, extending 200 feet down to the floodplain of the Yellow River. We constructed a flag-

stone stairway several years ago so Donna could walk the dogs down to the riverbank. Stone benches added later allow for rest stops to enjoy the view. Planted on the bank are both a Holly Springs azalea collection and a large collection of Glenn Dale azaleas, accented by rhododendron hybrids of Russ and Velma Haag and Wayne Hutchins. Across the ravine, space has been left for a Huang azalea collection and a Delp rhododendron planting.

Donna's favorite garden spot is found beside the granite outcrop where she watches the butterflies visit the water gardens. Bird watching areas are found close to the house near the many bird feeders in the side and back yards. The birds love the mature plants to hide and nest in. Hummingbirds can be enjoyed from April through October. Bird and nature watching at the Yellow River can include kingfishers, blue heron, river cooters basking on logs in the sun, and an occasional river otter searching for fish.

Color and fragrance can be found in the Coleman garden 12 months of the year. From March through August, native azaleas bloom in some corner. The best way to view it is to pick a path and meander, enjoying each nook and cranny. And for another perspective, simply turn around and retrace your steps. When you begin to tire, just find a bench, relax, and enjoy the sights and sounds. Above all, Donna and I want everyone to enjoy our garden as much as we do!

*Joe and Donna Coleman are both Georgia natives who have lived most of their lives in the metropolitan Atlanta area. Joe, a graduate of Emory University, has maintained a general dental practice in Stone Mountain for the last 31 years. Donna has employed her organizational skills in several professions: as an RN with interest in orthopedics and infection control, as a teacher and director of a day care center, and now works for Hallmark cards. Family, church, and club activities keep them busy.*

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## Earl Sommerville Garden

Roger Duvall — Atlanta, Georgia

You don't notice it right away. The first thing you notice about Earl Sommerville's garden is the color from the camellias in February and the azaleas and rhododendrons from March through July. Then you notice the vigor of the plants, the spotless leaves, the turgid new growth, the multitude of stems on many of the natives. Only then do you realize that you have been walking for half an hour and you haven't seen a single weed. About this time, you realize that Earl does not do things halfway.

This nearly perfect garden is situated at the foot of Little Kennesaw Mountain, just next to Kennesaw Mountain, where a bloody Civil War battle, a prelude to the siege of Atlanta, was fought. Earl's two acres lie less than 1000 feet from the Kennesaw National Battlefield Park. Little Kennesaw is clearly

visible over the 'George Lindley Taber' azaleas at the back of the garden, a beautiful example of borrowed landscape.

The garden includes around 3,000 evergreen azaleas, most of them planted in beds where several of the same variety are grown in mass. Earl prefers the Robin Hills, Southern Indicas (particularly 'George Lindley Taber'), the Girard, and Back Acres hybrids. And speaking of "back achers," Earl sprays the azaleas every week for about six weeks beginning when they first start to show color. This is primarily to prevent petal blight and lace-bug infestation. The evergreens are pruned annually, to knock off the vertical shoots, but they are allowed to grow together, forming unbroken expanses of gently curving green. The plants are well cared for and produce plenty of foli-



What happens when a Japanese azalea (*Rhododendron japonicum*) crosses with a Flame azalea (*R. calendulaceum*)? A delicate pale yellow ball-truss form, found in Earl Sommerville's huge collection of his species azalea hybrids. (Image by Earl Sommerville.)