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Pineywoods Native Plant Center, May 2005

SFA Gardens, Stephen F. Austin State University

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Well, I can now retire! I’ve just seen, touched and photographed the Arbole de Tule, the giant Montezuma cypress in the valley of Oaxaca, Mexico. During a vacation in Oaxaca city in early March, Janet and I enjoyed a little time in the shadow of the big fellow. Yes, it’s huge. Amazing, in fact. I would say foreboding. The Arbole de Tule is the big one, perhaps the largest tree in the world, depending on how you measure these craggy patriarchs. Located in Sta. Maria del Tule, a small peaceful village with a life built around the tree and the church it shades. El Arbol rises to 140’, and looms over the bell tower of the church of Our Lady built by the Spanish over 400 years ago. “Ahuehuete O Sabino” is a little over 140 feet tall, and most amazing, the tree boasts an astounding 190 feet in circumference. Now, I haven’t discovered just exactly how this was calculated because the tree footprint would be really confusing to measure, best described as convoluted ellipse. The maximum diameter is reported as 46’, and the wood in this tree is estimated at over 630 tons! As for age, the tree remains an enigma. While reports of 2800-3500 years old are in the literature, the most recent estimates are less. Most agree that the tree is over 2000 years old.

One interesting side note, in 1994, the cypress failed to leaf out properly and appeared to be dying. Because the tree and the church is the landmark for the village, a great effort was implemented to help the tree. Consultants from as far away as Kew England flew in and a conclusion was quickly reached. This giant Montezuma cypress was thirsty and there was too much foot traffic under the tree. The tree lies in what was once more marshland than it is today. The tree was watered more frequently and heavy foot traffic to the base of the tree was eliminated by the construction of a viewing fence. Gardeners were brought in to care for the tree. The tree recovered. Dead limbs were cut away and the tree appears ready for another few centuries. As one might suspect, the gardeners of this tree have made a fine little side business selling seeds and seedlings of the tree to the local population and others interested in the progeny of this amazing tree – an interesting dispersal of Taxodium genes in this amazing valley and the world beyond the mountain.
 Blooms, Blooms, and More Blooms: Ruby M. Mize Azalea Garden Update

By Barbara Stump

This year our bloom sequence in the Ruby M. Mize Azalea Garden really showed why it is a good idea to plant many different cultivars from many different hybrid groups.

The azalea bloom began with the Chinese Huangs the second week of March. The beautiful scarlet red Huang 1-6-31 caused quite a stir on every tour, as it was totally covered with little hose-within-hose flowers that stayed until the end of March. According to Buddy Lee, Azalea Society of America President and Encore azalea breeder, Huang 1-6-31 is an excellent candidate for a selective breeding program.

Our favorite lavender azalea is the purple spider azalea, Rhododendron ‘Koromo Shikibl.’ It was a cresendo of blooms beginning in late February but decided to go to seed by month’s end. Those hot days of 75- and 80-degree weather in March caused our stand-by Southern Indicas like lavender ‘George Lindley Taber’ and bright purple ‘Red Formosa’ to bloom fast and fade fast.

As of April 5, our deciduous magnolia ‘Yellow Bird’ finally flowered at the entrance to the garden, flanked by pink ‘Illusions’ azaleas. As of April 26, there were still large groups of azaleas blooming, notably the coral flowers of ‘Kaempferi 6811’, ‘Ben Morrison’, and a number Robin Hill hybrids. These hybrids were developed by Robert Gartrell to produce hardy shrubs that have large flowers. Several lovely examples still blooming in the garden are the double (hose-in-hose) flowers of ‘Nancy of Robinhill’ by the entrance to the Council Ring, the large flowers of ‘Watcher’ also leading into the Council Ring, and the very large flowers (up to 4 inches across) of ‘Robin Hill Gillie.’

One of my personal favorites, ‘Ben Morrison’ put on an incredible show in late April, nearly covering the shady section of Bed 3 with red and white flowers that look a bit like star-gazer lilies. Now that we are in May, most of our azaleas have earned a rest, but the Satsuki in Beds 4 and 17 are just beginning. Come visit the Japanese maples and the hydrangeas this summer.

We continue to plant new varieties in the garden, thanks to the generosity of friends with the Ozark Chapter of the American Rhododendron Society. Elepidote Rhododendrons from Keith Johansson’s growing operation, Metro Maples in Fort Worth are being trialed in the Ruby M. Mize Azalea Garden. These will be a challenge to grow here with our summer heat, but we are planting them high in a shady area of the garden, adding extra peat moss, and will take great care of them. While this type of rhododendron can grow to 30 feet tall up north, we expect these to stay under six feet tall for the next 10 years.

Meadows Foundation Grant Benefits Educational Programs at Arboretum and Pinneywoods Native Plant Center

Stephen F. Austin State University has received a grant worth up to $107,000 from The Meadows Foundation of Dallas. The grant will benefit SFA’s Pinneywoods Native Plant Center, as well as East Texas school students and teachers.

The university will use the funding to train 75 East Texas-area teachers each year for the next two years to use inquiry-based environmental science teaching and will provide field-based science instruction to 7,700 school-aged children in the first year. In the second year of the grant, instruction will be provided to 8,500 children.

Through the Meadows Foundation grant, the Pinneywoods Native Plant Center and the SFA Mast Arboretum will seek to provide hands-on, outdoor activities to improve the science literacy of school students and their teachers.

“These activities will allow students to become actively engaged in asking questions, seeking solutions, designing investigations, and then asking new questions,” said Elyce Rodewald, education coordinator of the plant center and arboretum. “Students involved in inquiry learning are encouraged to cultivate problem-solving skills by developing an understanding of how to make observations, collect and analyze information, synthesize information, and draw conclusions.”

Grant funds will also be used at the native plant center, located at 2900 Raguet St., to complete site plans and pre-design work for an indoor environmental education center and, by Sept. 30, 2006, to complete an additional two miles of walking trails.

The university has received $77,000 in funding for the first year of the grant, according to Dr. Jerry Holbert, vice president for university advancement.

"Funding for the second-year is $30,000 and must be matched dollar-for-dollar in new donations to the university specifically designated for the project," Holbert said. “This grant will enable SFA to greatly enhance and expand its environmental education program. Literally thousands of children in East Texas will benefit from the generous support of The Meadows Foundation.”

The Meadows Foundation is a private philanthropic institution established in 1948 by Algor H. and Virginia Meadows to benefit the people of Texas. The foundation’s mission is to assist the people and institutions of Texas improve the quality and circumstances of life for themselves and future generations. Foundation grants support work in the fields of arts and culture, civic and public affairs, education, health and human services.

Students from Lufkin Middle School learn about East Texas ecosystems with Elyce Rodewald, Education Coordinator at the PNPC and Mast Arboretum. Photo by Hardy Meredith.

Remember

When?

The SFA Mast Arboretum Grows andProsper 1996-Present

1996

Arboretum receives endowment dedicated to general operating support from long-time Arboretum supporters, A.T. and Pat Mast, Jr.

1997

SFA Horticulture gets a line in the budget and first full-time Arboretum employee is hired.

Magnolia collection planted on slope behind Physical Plant and new border installed along the Agriculture/Art parking lot.

1998

Arboretum named a satellite garden of the Hardy Fern Foundation, primarily through the work of volunteer Roger Hughes.

Garden Gala Day crowd estimated at 1500. New red and white tent a hit. Lyda Harber does flamenco dancing, Wynn Logan and the Golden Dreamers Band performs, Bill Welch, Greg Grant, and Dave Creech give tours and lectures. Circus-like atmosphere.

Cheryl Boyette leads fund-raising efforts for Children’s Garden Pavilion.

Arboretum purchases first tractor and ‘gator.’

1999

3200 taxa represented in the garden.

Work begins on the Azalea Garden.

Timber-frame pavilion built by the Timber Framers Guild of North America in the Children’s Garden.

November 12: Dedication of the SFA Mast Arboretum. Rain forced it into the Coliseum - about 100 in attendance - plus the third floor of the Austin building and a number of Regents. Unveiling of the sign. A.T. and Pat plant a Japanese maple and an azalea. Photo-op.

December 5: The great all-Nacogdoches Azalea garden plant out. Civic groups and individuals working to plant azaleas and more azaleas. 50+ volunteers total during the day, some for a few hours, some for all day.

1999

January 29: Brute of a flood – lost couple of hundred plants only from azalea garden – Massive clean

(continued on page 4)