

# Azaleas: The Flaming Drama of the South

by Dr. Bill Barrick,  
Executive Director Emeritus

'Pride of Mobile'



'Formosa'



'George Lindley Tabor'



'Mrs G.G. Gerbing'

In 1951, Walter Bellingrath published his wishes for the perpetuation of Bellingrath Gardens and Home in a document titled "The Bellingrath-Morse Foundation." Although Camellias were reported to be his favorite flower, he described his thoughts about Azaleas in this document in the following manner: "For almost two hundred years there have been Azaleas in Mobile, appreciated and admired by those who have seen them. In the middle of the Eighteenth Century, Fifise Langlois, returning to Mobile from a visit to his childhood home in Toulouse, France, brought three colors of Azaleas to Mobile. From that time on, we find the Azaleas woven into the pattern of Mobile's history. When France ceded Mobile to England in 1763, visitors came to see the Azaleas; and in 1779 when the Spaniards took Mobile, they marveled at the glory of these flowers. Since the turn of the Twentieth Century, some of the bushes planted about the middle of the Eighteenth Century have become almost trees, towering fifteen to twenty feet in height and measuring over a hundred feet in circumference. Many of these ancient bushes have been brought into Bellingrath Gardens, where they are zealously guarded for this and other generations to enjoy and admire. Azaleas grow in many parts of the world, but for

variety, size, colors, arrangement and natural setting, the gorgeous Azaleas in Bellingrath Gardens are unequalled. When the Azalea bush is in full bloom, every vestige of foliage is entirely smothered in the crimson, coral, white or purple flowers that the bush may bear. *Better Homes and Gardens* has appropriately called them "The Flaming Drama of the South."

The Azaleas that Walter Bellingrath referred to belong to a class of Azaleas named Southern Indian Hybrids or Indica Azaleas, and are best grown in the Deep South or horticultural hardiness zones 8 and 9. They were first grown in Magnolia Gardens in Charleston, South Carolina, by the Reverend John G. Drayton in 1848. It is thought that the original plants were purchased from a Philadelphia nurseryman who had a branch nursery in Charleston. Later in 1856, Mr. P.J. Berckman established a nursery in Augusta, Georgia, and introduced many unusual varieties of Indicas. Much of the original Fruitland Nursery has been incorporated into Augusta National Golf Course and Indicas are generally in full bloom during the tournament.

Probably the most noted and planted cultivars of Indica Azaleas are 'Formosa' – magenta purple; 'Pride of Mobile' – deep pink; 'George Lindley Tabor' – white with pink freckled centers and 'Mrs. G.G. Gerbing' – a solid white sport of Tabor. All of these varieties can become quite tall in the landscape. My good friend John Floyd, former editor of *Southern Living*, certainly agreed with Walter Bellingrath's assessment of size, for he once told me that Mobilians can grow azaleas as big as a Trailway bus. We all have read Bill Finch's articles on azalea pruning and I share his views that these wonderful plants don't need to be pruned like boxwoods and need to retain their graceful, loose form. Oftentimes, the best course for pruning old plants is to prune severely to rejuvenate new growth. At Bellingrath Gardens and Home, we do initiate this type of pruning method to restore many of our old plantings that have developed dieback as a result of recent hurricanes.

The city of Mobile has been famous for being the Azalea City, and certainly Bellingrath Gardens and Home will always have the Southern Indian Azalea as a major feature of the Gardens. ■