

## BELLINGRATH GARDENS

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Bellingrath Gardens, Mobile, Alabama

**T**HROUGHOUT the southern states one finds many enchanting views, ranging from the rugged majesty of mile-high mountains to the serenity of the sea. In few places, however, will lovers of beauty and flowers find more charm than in the many gardens, some of which are nationally famous and attract hundreds of thousands of visitors annually.

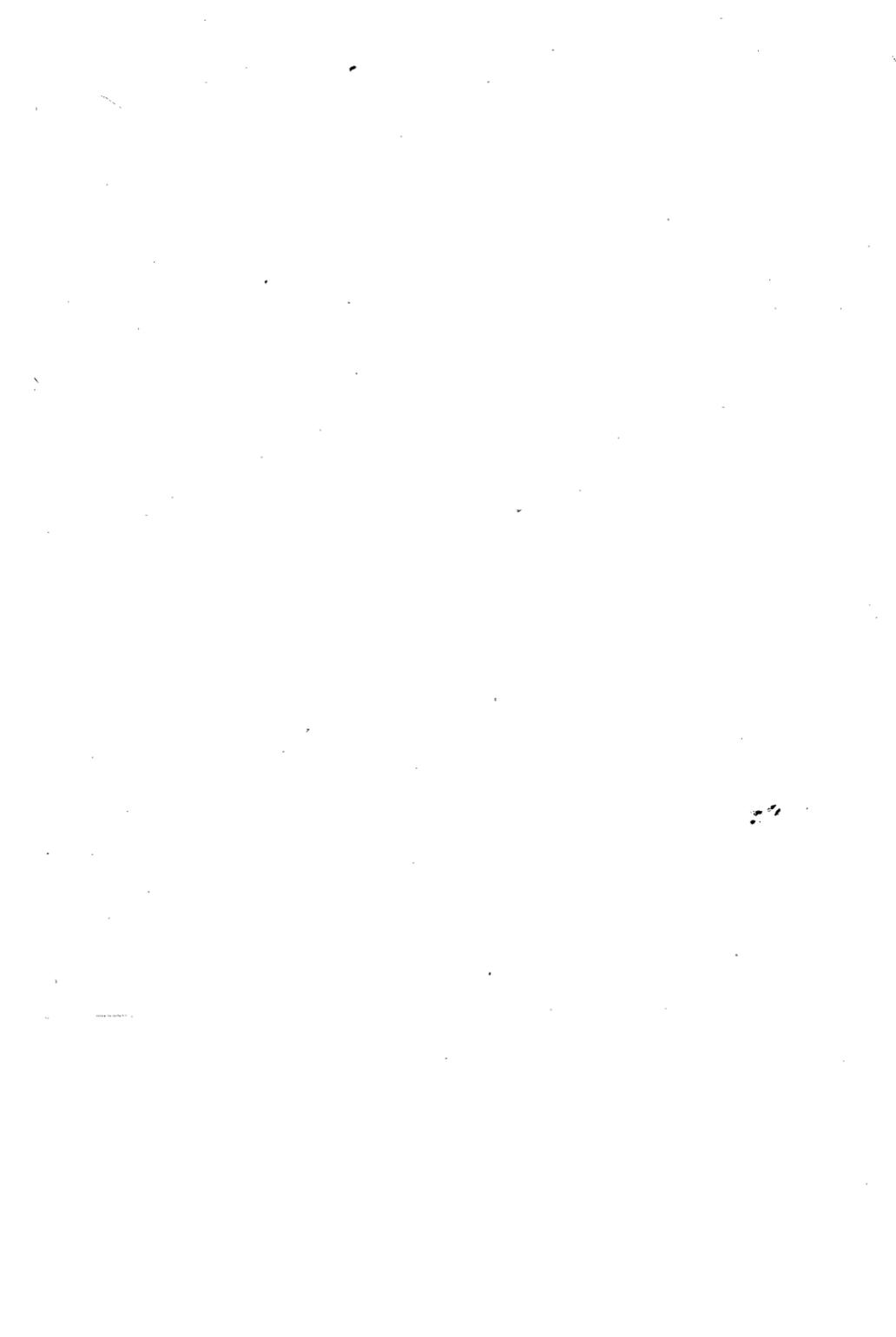
Among these is the famed Bellingrath Gardens—"The Charm Spot of the Deep South"—on the Isle-Aux-Oies (Fowl) River twenty miles south of Mobile just off the main highway to New Orleans, created because of the love of beauty of my late beloved wife, Bessie Morse Bellingrath. It seems incredible that these gardens, spreading over sixty acres, were built out of what was an untamed wilderness of magnolias, moss-draped live oaks, bays, pines, etc., less than a quarter of a century ago.

Here in 1917 a fishing lodge was established, which for ten years delighted me and the relatives and friends with whom I shared its pleasures. Then there came to us the feeling that this was not enough. The beauty of this spot was so enchanting that we began to dream of glorious flowers along curving trails, of vistas through the stately trees, of thousands of other beauty lovers whom we knew would visit the charmland we envisioned. About this time, in the year 1927, my wife and I made a trip to Europe and visited the famous gardens of the Old World. Enthused by the wondrous works of nature and man, upon returning to Mobile we began a more elaborate development of the garden at our city home, still thinking of the Charm Spot twenty miles away. As our city garden overflowed with azalea plants, some were removed and transplanted under Mrs. Bellingrath's direction around the fisherman's lodge, with the help of an outstanding landscape architect of the Gulf Coast, the late George B. Rodgers.

Thus were Bellingrath Gardens born, and the effect of flaming azaleas among the magnolias, bays, cedars, hollies and moss-draped oaks was so unique that extensive planting and landscaping was undertaken. A French landscape gardener and



A walk in Bellingrath Gardens



others were consulted and the development of Bellingrath Gardens became the ambition of both Mrs. Bellingrath and myself. The vision grew as the months and then the years passed. We traveled far and wide to see other gardens, always searching for ideas and further inspiration for the development of our own tract. The gardens were first opened in the spring of 1932. Unlike many places, Bellingrath Gardens are open the year round and each season finds them filled with beauty.

Camellias begin to open in Bellingrath Gardens in August and last until April, reaching their height during January and February. Each week brings forth a new spectacle—a continual parade of changing colors to enchant the visitor. Long before the camellia show is over, the azaleas burst in all their glory of color and profusion, starting about the middle of February and lasting over a period of about eight weeks.

From October to April, the sweet olive, *Osmanthus fragrans*, fills the air with its fragrance. In the late spring the mountain laurel, dogwood, and the double-flowering spirea brighten up the woods with their delicate blossoms, and the stokesia, hemerocallis and numerous other spring flowers vie with the colorful hydrangeas, oleanders, southern magnolias, and many other trees and shrubs. These are followed during the summer months by crape-myrtle, hibiscus, allamanda, thousands of roses in the beautifully designed rose garden, and numerous other flowers and colorful foliage plants that make the garden a thing of beauty, each month different and possessing a charm of its own.

Azaleas and camellias contribute so much to this garden pageant that they deserve more than passing mention. The wonderful forms and colors of *Camellia japonica* have no equal in the plant world for their beauty and fitness for general landscape work. The use of azaleas in this natural setting was so enchanting that we added from year to year to the plantings until now there are more than a quarter-million plants. Visitors are fully convinced that here is one of the most remarkable collections of this beautiful flowering shrub ever gathered together anywhere. No other plants can give such a diversity of types and colors.

Azaleas are no new flower to the Deep South, since for almost 200 years they have been planted along the Gulf Coast. It was in the middle of the seventeenth century that Fifise Langloise returned to Mobile from a visit to his childhood home

in France and brought with him three colors of azaleas. When France ceded Mobile to England in 1763 visitors came to see the azaleas and marveled at the glory of these flowers in the magnificent setting of live oaks, palmettos, dogwoods, bays, and other trees. The trees and old Spanish moss have been preserved and have only been complemented by the use of other plants, which are happy in their location and thrive in this southern climate and soil.

In Bellingrath Gardens there are more than 2000 mature specimens of *Camellia japonica*, undoubtedly one of the finest collections of specimen plants to be found anywhere. Over 400 varieties are embraced in this collection. All of the large specimens were secured from private homes in the vicinity of Mobile and along the Gulf Coast, and exceptional care was exercised in the selection for grouping in landscape effects. Individual specimens are planted as accents at the ends of vistas and walks, ranging in size from 12 to 20 feet high and from 8 to 16 feet in diameter and from fifty to one hundred years old. In the Camellia Parterre alone, 100 specimen plants are grouped with a border of azaleas in many varieties and other seasonal flowers. Over a period of several years, the flowers of *Camellia japonica* have been a never-ending source of beauty from the middle of August until the middle of April. The first to bloom are Arejishi and Daikagura, and among the last is Victor Emmanuel.

To describe the varieties would be utterly impossible. They must be seen to be fully appreciated. A few of the many rare varieties of *Camellia japonica* we have in the gardens are:

Magnoliæflora, Bessie Morse Bellingrath, Donckelari, Glen 40, Haku-rakuten, Iwane-shibori, C. M. Hovey, Daikagura, Gigantea, Lady Vansittart, Pink Star, Victor Emmanuel, Swan, September Morn, Caldwell, Goshoguruma, Waterloo, Mrs. K. Sawada, K. Sawada, Robert Norton, Royal White, Victory White, White Empress, White Giant, Imura, White Hibiscus, White King, White Queen, Victory Maid, White Pine Cone, Frizzle White, Smiling Beauty, Red Hibiscus, Luries Favorite, Queen Bessie, Sara-sa, Adolphe Audusson, Adolphe Audusson Var., Gloire de Nantes, Lotus, Duncan Bell, Mrs. Charles Cobb, Lindsay Neill, Mathotiana, Vedrine.

Wonderful background effects have been obtained by the use of many specimens of *Camellia Sasanqua* and *Camellia saluenensis*. The sasanqua is extremely satisfactory in landscape work,

especially for backgrounds and hedges, while it also can be used as individual specimens and in foundation plantings. *Sasanqua* is considered one of the best broad-leaf evergreens because it is evergreen, very hardy, blooms early and profusely.

After seeing Bellingrath Gardens, one is convinced that the camellia has no equal in the plant world for its beauty and fitness for the beautification of the home and for general landscape use.

Under an endowment plan, it is now assured that this "Charm Spot of the Deep South" will be perpetuated long after those now living are gone. During the past decade the owners have seen thousands enjoy the rare and lovely spectacle that has been developed, and their earnest wish is that future generations may also have that pleasure. The endowment plan provides for maintenance and further development of the gardens and directs that any surplus revenues shall be devoted to the religious and secular education of underprivileged girls and boys. Here, indeed, is a perpetual memorial to the broad vision of my wife, the late Bessie Morse Bellingrath, which helps make the world a better place in which to live. The calm serenity, beauty and peace of the gardens makes one feel that "God's in His Heaven and all's right with the world."

EDITOR'S NOTE.—Through the courtesy of Mr. Bellingrath the Gardens were opened to members of the Society at the time of the 1947 Annual Meeting. This the first of a series of articles describing show gardens of Camellia interest.