

Azalea Trail History

In 1927 the River Oaks Garden Club was organized by 27 residents of the new River Oaks area. It was not until 1935 that they held the first Garden Pilgrimage as it was called then. That first year there were 12 gardens on the tour, 5 of which were on Lazy Lane. The tour was also held the last weekend in April. The proceeds from the tour were used to beautify the grounds of River Oaks School which we know today as River Oaks Elementary. In 1936 the Pilgrimage changed its name to the Azalea Trail as three gardens were open in March to show azaleas in addition to the April Pilgrimage. People were not familiar with the beautiful azaleas as there were not native to the area so the garden club used the Azalea Trail as a means of educating the public on azaleas and horticulture.

The 1940's brought all kinds of challenges to the Azalea Trail as the war years brought severe shortages of plant material. As a result, members began growing bedding and landscape plants from seeds and cuttings. This introduced the Victory Garden concept into the landscape design at their own homes. The gardens incorporated vegetables into borders in combination with flowering species and fruit trees into the landscape rather than in isolated vegetable gardens and fruit orchards of the past. This proved to be a concept greatly appreciated by the public who attended the Azalea Trail and set the stage for a new interest in purchasing fresh produce at the Greens Market held on the Forum Building grounds.

Each year the Azalea Trail's attendance grew setting a new record of 10,000 people in 1945. Visitors to the trail included several thousand military men and women who enjoyed the Trail as honored guests. Among them was a huge contingency of high ranking Army and Navy officers who were in Houston to lay the cornerstone for the Naval Hospital which later became the Veteran's Hospital. The Army officers accompanied recovering military patients from McCloskey Hospital in Temple and were hosted by the River Oaks garden Club for the entire weekend of the Trail. In addition to attending the Trail, the ladies entertained them various social events in an expression of gratitude for their sacrifices. This year ten gardens and three homes were on the Trail at a time when the garden Club had less than 50 members. Members were expected to enthusiastically support the success of the Trail not only with their dedicated work but also by opening their homes and gardens. These efforts were more important during the war years than any previous time. A quote from the Shreveport Times relates the sentiment of those who attended the Trail, The beauty of a garden is yours to keep, in your heart. We all need beauty now more than ever before. Our hearts are troubled and our minds are worried but peace and beauty can be found in a garden filled with

lovely colors and beautiful flowers.” Perhaps these comments relate very well to our own difficult world today, and put our challenges in proper perspective.

In 1948 the Forum Building first opened as an information center during the Azalea Trail. Flower arrangements by members were also on exhibit and member Frances Hannay published a pamphlet for the public called “Period Flower Arrangements”.

1957, Night gardens were shown on the Azalea Trail for the first time.

In 1961, Miss Ima Hogg granted permanent supervision of Bayou Bend Gardens to the River Oaks Garden Club.

In 1982 the Garden Club received a resolution from the City Council and a proclamation from the Mayor designating ROGC Azalea Trail Days and commending our contribution to the historical preservation, conservation, and beautification of the city.

In 2006 the City of Houston was designated an “Azalea City”. What started as a means to educate the people of Houston . . . now has become the heralding symbol for spring in the city of Houston.

The Azalea Trail offers Houstonians an enjoyable weekend that educates the public about architecture, flower arranging and horticultural possibilities in our region. The proceeds from this event are given back to the community to be applied to specific projects dealing with education, conservation and civic beautification.

Through the years the proceeds from the Azalea Trail have landscaped the area along Allen Parkway near Shepherd, new entrance to Bayou Bend on Westcott, helped landscape Tranquility Park, and Discovery Green, and continue to landscape River Oaks Elementary. Last year the focus of the proceeds went toward restoring our beloved Bayou Bends Gardens which suffered devastating damage from Hurricane Ike along with Holly Hall, Trees for Houston, Casa de Esperanza, Lamar High School HISD, and Students Conserving America.

This year marks the 75 Annual Azalea Trail. We are proud to continue to have the Bayou Bend Gardens, Rienzi, and the Forum of Civics Building on the tour along with 4 fabulous private homes and gardens all within walking distance here in River Oaks. We hope you will join us this year.