

Massee Lane Gardens: A Camellia Collector's Paradise

by Aaron Dorman

DEEP IN THE heart of central Georgia's peach-growing region lies another source of southern pride: a garden showcasing one of the world's most extensive collections of camellias. These evergreen shrubs come into bloom in either fall or winter, when most other flowering plants are dormant.

Located in Fort Valley, about 100 miles south of Atlanta, Massee Lane Gardens was originally the private home of David C. Strother, a local peach grower who became fascinated by camellias in the 1930s. He began arranging them around his farm, gradually expanding the plantings as he added more varieties. Legend has it that there was never a camellia he didn't like, but according to Celeste Richard, executive director of the gardens, Strother's favorite was 'Ville de Nantes', a camellia whose flowers have red and white variegation and serrated edges. Its petals fold upright in a "rabbit ear" formation. You can still find this selection today, growing along one of the gardens' many brick walkways.

WINTER WONDERS

Before he died, Strother donated the garden and grounds to the American Camellia Society (ACS) in 1966. The society helps coordinate camellia shows around the country and promotes more widespread use of camellias in gardening. Today, Massee Lane has a little over 30 acres of plantings, about a third of which is devoted to more than 1,000 camellia species and selections.

"The camellia is not only beautiful," says Richard, "it blooms in the fall and winter—quite the opposite of many other flowering plants—which is why it is sometimes called 'The Winter's Rose'."

In fact, Massee Lane's "peak" season is in February, when the winter-blooming varieties are in full flower and the garden hosts its month-long "Festival of the Camellia," which includes weekly gardening



Massee Lane's Abendroth Japanese Garden features a small pavilion and koi-filled pond.



Young visitors enjoy a guided tour in the tropical-themed area of the Children's Garden.

workshops, camellia photography displays, and a competitive camellia show. The other primary bloom period for some camellias is in September and October.

The garden includes areas devoted to species camellias, hybrids, and "antique" selections introduced prior to 1900. One of the newest garden areas, located on the west side of the property, contains a collection of wild camellia species. This garden allows curators to evaluate the landscape potential for some of these little-known camellias and also serves a role in conserving the germplasm of some rare species. Visitors

can follow the walking path or take a golf cart through this area. The curators hope to complete the species garden in the near future, although, as Richard observes, "there are always more species to collect and add."

Camellia varieties too tender to be grown outdoors can be viewed in the **Thomas Jefferson Smith Memorial Greenhouse**, which also serves as a demonstration area for growing camellias for the production of show flowers. Plantings in the greenhouse are complemented by brick walking paths and a central reflecting pool.



The Environmental Garden shows off a collection of Southeast native plants.

Additional Information

Massee Lane Gardens, 100 Massee Lane, Fort Valley, GA 31030. (478) 967-2358. www.americancamellias.com.

■ Hours: Year round from 10 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., Tuesday through Saturday. Open on Sundays 1 p.m. through 4:30 p.m. Closed on Mondays.

■ Admission: Adults (12+) \$5; Seniors (55+) \$4; free for children under 12.

■ Massee Lane Gardens participates in the American Horticultural Society Reciprocal Admissions Program. AHS members showing a current membership card receive free admission and discounts on educational programs or events.

Other nearby places to explore:

Lane Southern Orchards, Fort Valley, GA. www.lanesouthernorchards.com.

Pearson Farm, Fort Valley, GA. www.pearsonfarm.com.

ADDITIONAL OFFERINGS

Visitors sated by camellia blossoms can follow steppingstones through and around Massee Lane's **Abendroth Japanese Garden**, to enjoy its small koi pond and pavilion. Massee Lane also has a 15-acre **Environmental Garden** devoted to plants native to the Southeast, and a picnic pavilion overlooking a lake. The lake area hosts a variety of waterfowl, and is a repository for locally endangered flora. Other gardens on the property include a children's garden divided into several themed areas, a daylily garden embellished with Alice in Wonderland sculptures, a rose garden, and a bog containing orchids and pitcher plants.

The main building houses a notable collection of porcelain sculptures—many of birds and other wildlife—by 20th-century American artist Edward Marshal Boehm. It is also where camellia workshops are held several times a year (the next one is in late January 2018), among other educational events offered by the ACS.

However you spend your time at Massee Lane, your visit will surely leave you as fascinated with camellias as Strother was when he first encountered them almost a century ago.

Aaron Dorman is an editorial intern for The American Gardener.