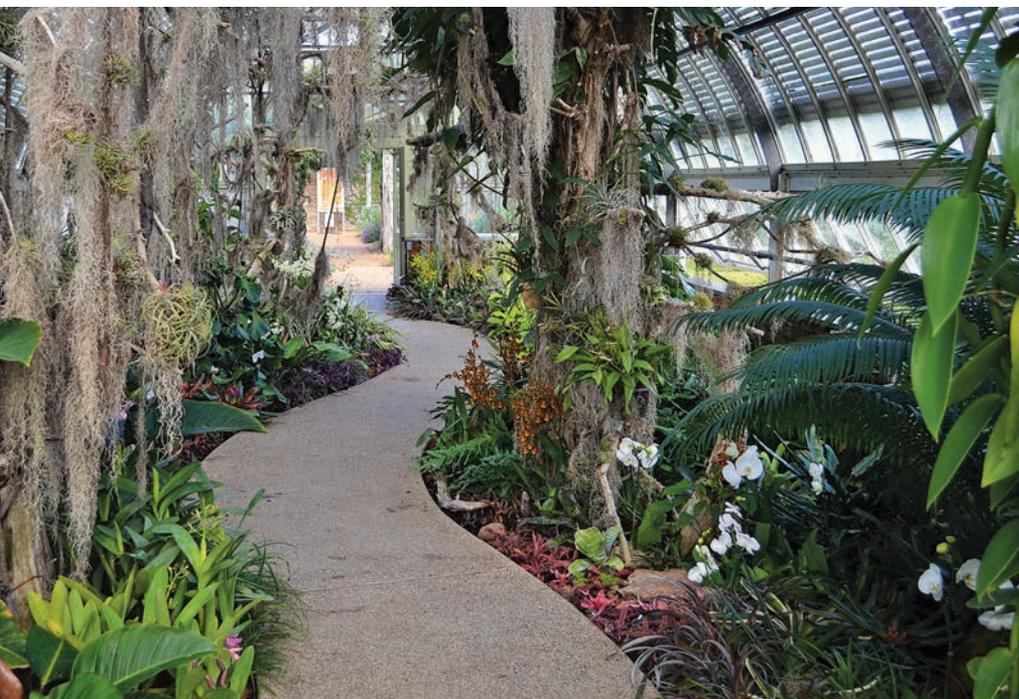


## Shangri La Botanical Gardens & Nature Center

by Lynn Brinkley



**Top:** The cypress-tupelo swamp of the Adams Bayou borders the botanical garden. **Above:** Spanish moss, orchids, and other tropical plants thrive in the century-old Epiphyte House.

**F**OR A garden named after an earthly paradise, Shangri La Botanical Gardens & Nature Center in Orange, Texas, has had to go through a number of daunting challenges to become what it is today. The first incarnation of Shangri La originated with Henry Jacob Lutchter Stark, the scion of a family that established a lucrative lumber company in Orange in the late 1800s.

Stark began his private garden in 1937, naming it after the utopian setting in James Hilton's 1933 novel, *Lost Horizon*. Stark's vision of paradise included both an oasis in his collected azaleas and camellias and the preservation of a cypress-tupelo swamp—a natural community indigenous to the Gulf Coast—which flanked his home. “At a time when an interest in protecting the environment was not in vogue, Mr. Stark created Shangri La to be a place where people could live in harmony with nature,” says Rick J. Lewandowski, Shangri La's current director.

### WEATHERING THE YEARS

Beginning in 1946, Stark opened his private garden to public viewing each spring. Thousands of people came to see his impressive azalea collection in full bloom, along with many other colorful tropical and subtropical plants. The garden suffered its first major setback in 1958, when a devastating snowstorm killed most of the plants. Shangri La subsequently closed, not to be reopened for 50 years.

Stark died in 1965, but he and his wife, Nelda, had established the Stark Foundation a few years prior to his passing. For decades, the foundation supported projects that benefited southeast Texas communities, but it wasn't until 2002 that the foundation set a goal of restoring Shangri La and showcasing the property's nearby ecosystems for educational purposes. Work was set to begin in 2005, but di-

PHOTOS ON THIS PAGE AND OPPOSITE COURTESY OF SHANGRI LA BOTANICAL GARDENS & NATURE CENTER



Surrounded in spring by blooming azaleas, the iconic Cypress Gate overlooking the Pond of the Blue Moon is made from the logs of cypress trees salvaged in the aftermath of Hurricane Rita, which devastated much of the Gulf Coast of the United States in 2005.

saster struck when Hurricane Rita blew through and destroyed more than 50,000 trees on the Stark property alone.

To make the best of the situation, Shangri La's planners repurposed the fallen trees for other uses within the redevelopment project. The garden finally opened to the public in 2008, but was again struck by an extreme weather event with flooding from Hurricane Ike in September that year, causing it to close for further renovation until March 2009.

## PARADISE FOUND

At 252 acres, the contemporary Shangri La serves a dual purpose as both a horticultural display and as a wetland habitat. Its **Discovery Theater** and **Nature Center** are LEED-certified buildings—Shangri La was the first facility in Texas to be certified as a platinum level project by the U.S. Green Building Council. These modern facilities complement the nearly 100-year-old **Epiphyte House**, which Lewandowski calls “the jewel of the three greenhouses that make up the Exhibition Greenhouses.”

Visitors may also explore the nature-inspired sculpture gardens, children's and edible gardens, and an ever-changing perennial border filled with a wide range of plants that are well adapted to the region's climate. A wetland demonstration

garden features aquatic plants that serve as a biofilter for water from nearby Ruby Lake. This 15-acre manmade water feature provides vital habitat to 5,000 migratory

birds each year, along with numerous turtles, fish, and alligators.

Among the staff's favorite spots is the **Pond of the Blue Moon**. In addition to being “a relaxing space to enjoy views of the garden,” Lewandowski says, “this is one of the best places to view the azaleas in bloom in March.” More than 40 varieties of azaleas, many of which represent the older varieties Stark grew, put on a dazzling show each spring.

In addition to these cultivated landscapes, Shangri La offers a wilder version of paradise, represented by a “complex matrix of wetlands, bayous, and swamps that are extremely important habitat for a wide range of aquatic and terrestrial wildlife,” says Lewandowski. Boat tours through Adams Bayou, which borders the property and its cypress–tupelo swamp, allow visitors a close-up view of these fragile coastal ecosystems and the creatures they support. A highlight of these tours is a visit to the **Survivor Tree**, a pond cypress (*Taxodium ascendens*) estimated to be more than 1,200 years old.

Thanks to Stark's original preservation efforts and to those who sought to build upon his vision, Shangri La remains a paradise for all to enjoy. 

*Lynn Brinkley is an editorial intern with The American Gardener.*

## Additional Information

### Shangri La Botanical Gardens & Nature Center

2111 W. Park Avenue, Orange, TX 77630.  
(409) 670-9113. <http://starkculturalvenues.org/shangrilagardens>.

- Hours: Open year round  
Tuesday–Saturday, 9 a.m.–5 p.m.
- Admission: Adults (ages 18–64) \$6; seniors (age 65 and up) and youth (ages 10–17) \$5; Children (ages 4–9) \$2
- Shangri La Botanical Gardens & Nature Center participates in AHS's Reciprocal Admissions Program. AHS members showing a current membership card receive free admission.

Other nearby sites to explore:  
**Houston Arboretum & Nature Center**,  
[www.houstonarboretum.org](http://www.houstonarboretum.org).  
**Mercer Botanic Gardens**,  
[www.themercersociety.org/visit](http://www.themercersociety.org/visit).  
**Orangefield Cormier Museum**,  
[www.orangefieldisd.com](http://www.orangefieldisd.com).