

Announcing the Gayla Mize Garden—A Tribute to a Beautiful Community Leader

What a joy it is to finally be able to celebrate this new addition to SFA Gardens! On January 25, 2011, the SFA Board of Regents officially named the southwestern eight-acre portion of the SFA Recreational Trails and Gardens in honor of a great friend of SFA Gardens, Gayla Mize. We are so pleased that her legacy of helping gardens grow throughout our community will now be the Gayla Mize Garden, a tranquil forest garden for all to see and enjoy, right across University Drive from the Ruby M. Mize Azalea Garden.



The story of how this came about is one of love and persistent dedication to doing something good for Nacogdoches and SFA. Ray Mize, an SFA grad (1951), came to the Agriculture Department office in May of 2010 with an axe and a cross-cut saw and asked Dr. Perritt why Dr. Creech wasn't doing something with the land across from the azalea garden. Ray seemed to think the area was a "stepchild," and he wanted to help us make it look like a beautiful garden. After all, the banner on the corner did say, SFA Recreational Trails and Gardens. Where's the Garden? He also hoped to honor the memory of his late wife, Gayla. The result is that we now have eight acres of Gayla Mize Garden, to plant with wonderful plant collections. These include an east-west allée of 50 *Chionanthus retusus* 'Tokyo Towers', deciduous hollies with red and yellow berries, numerous species deciduous azaleas, a number of redbuds and dogwoods, and even some camellias. More will be planted while the cool weather holds, and then we'll be collecting more plants to place in the southern side of the site this next fall. Our goal is for another beautiful garden, but one that is very open for ambling quietly among the pines.

All of this is so perfect. Gayla was a leader in many garden projects in Nacogdoches. Not only was she devoted to historic preservation and community projects in downtown Nacogdoches, she also was one of the devoted leaders of the effort to bring tourists to enjoy our history and our gardens.

According to Pam Fitch, who was Director of the Nacogdoches Convention and Visitors Bureau in 2000, "Simply put, there wouldn't be a Nacogdoches Azalea Trail without Gayla Mize. From 1998 to 2000, more than one person suggested that Nacogdoches should have an azalea trail to showcase its beautiful spring landscapes. However, the

suggestion remained just a suggestion because no one “grabbed the bull by the horns,” as they say. In early 2000, I met with Assistant CVB Director Sherri Greenlee (Skeeters) in an attempt to move the idea forward. By this time, the Ruby M. Mize Azalea Garden had been planted on the campus of Stephen F. Austin State University, and we believed it could be the cornerstone of our efforts to promote nature tourism in Nacogdoches. At the time, neither Sherri nor I knew enough about azaleas to take the first step in developing or promoting an azalea trail, but we knew who to call – Gayla Mize.

“We approached Gayla with our intention, and she immediately committed herself to the project. Our largest challenge was the short amount of time we had to prepare. It was February and azalea blooming season was only weeks away. This fact did not discourage Gayla. She immediately went to work.” For that first Azalea Trail Gayla helped map the trail, select the three different routes within the trail, then she recruited Ray to help her make directional signs. Together, they spent hours on the signs, and she and Sherri spent more hours placing them around the trail route. The following year the CVB committed funding to produce professional signage and brochure maps for the event. Gayla recruited her garden club, the Flora Garden Club, to assist with azalea trail activities, including a downtown plant sale to kick-off the event. Under Gayla’s leadership more events were added each year, including a floral arrangement show and workshop. Since then, the CVB and SFA Gardens have partnered to give numerous tours of the Ruby M. Mize Azalea Garden, and developed the annual Azalea Symposium and Little Princess Tea Party events that have been very successful.

Dr. Creech gave this testimonial for Dr. Pattillo to read when Ray and Gayla were honored at the 2010 Foundation Gala: "Ray and Gayla Mize are a special part of making SFA's garden world such a great success. Both were there in the trenches when it was just a small spot on the south side of the Agriculture building – this was way back when there was no staff, no trucks, no tractors, no budget, and no credibility – just a small patch of ground with a few students, wheelbarrows, shovels, and some energetic volunteers hoping to make a bigger garden. Ray and Gayla loved being part of this gardening adventure – and they both shared the vision that Nacogdoches and SFA would someday be a great garden spot in the South. They are special friends for a special garden. SFA Gardens is – and will continue to be – the result of plants, people, and plans circling around and zeroing in on a really great idea, then making it happen. Ray and Gayla are part of that history."

And, finally, we owe Gayla a debt of gratitude for bringing Ray’s cousin Dorothy to help with the Arboretum Spring Gala plant sale in 1998 where they made signs and came to our ground-breaking for the new “SFA Azalea Garden.” Because Gayla loved our efforts to develop gardens at SFA, and because Dorothy loved our get-going attitude to work, we now have endowments for both the Ruby M. Mize Azalea Garden and the Gayla Mize Garden. We thank Ray Mize and the Mize family from the bottom of our hearts for sharing in these wonderful far-sighted women’s passions for beauty and their dedication to Nacogdoches, SFA, and to all those who visit our fair city now and in the future.