



# History



If you walk through the Gardens at Stephen F. Austin State University today, you might notice the expansive plant collections, attractive water features, showy flowers, or school children learning in an outdoor classroom. It is hard to imagine that in 1985 the Gardens were just an idea--the areas now lush with ornamental and native plants were a tangled jungle of invasive privet.

In the fall of 1985, Dr. David Creech presented his first ornamental horticulture class with a project--to create a small display garden on the south side of the SFA Agriculture Building. They did just that, and the rest is history. Today, the SFA Mast Arboretum has grown from its original quarter acre to ten acres with over twenty themed display gardens. The Ruby M. Mize Azalea Garden is the largest azalea garden in Texas with eight acres and over 520 azalea cultivars as well as Japanese maples, camellias and magnolias. The SFA Pineywoods Native Plant Center, developed in 2000, offers more than forty acres of native pine and hardwood forest, two miles of trails, and the Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Demonstration Garden.

The education programs offered at the gardens have blossomed as well as the facilities. In the early years, Dr. Creech or his graduate students might lead an impromptu "walk and talk" tour for elementary students visiting the SFA campus, but the main focus was on building a living laboratory for SFA students in horticulture, biology, environmental science and botany. In the mid-1990s, a graduate student at SFA recognized the incredible potential of the gardens to be a premier environmental education center for area school children and citizens. The student was Cheryl Tate, and she pursued the development of curriculum-based programming for elementary students, pre-service teacher training curriculum for SFA Elementary Education majors, and funding for an outdoor classroom pavilion to be located in the SFA Mast Arboretum.



In March 1998, the Timber Framers Guild of North America raised a remarkable timber frame pavilion in the Children's Garden in only one day. Shortly thereafter, a two-day educational event called the Spring Fling was held in the pavilion. SFA students presented 21 different hands-on science activities to school children and area families. The event was repeated in October as the Fall Festival and included a scarecrow contest sponsored by Keep Nacogdoches Beautiful (KNB).

In 1999 an International Paper Environmental Education grant allowed KNB to develop an educational partnership with SFA and the Arboretum to create the Bugs, Bees, Butterflies and Blossoms Festival. This outdoor science education event impacted 2,000 students that year.

In 1999-2002, a Kellogg Foundation TxLINC grant allowed Cheryl (Tate) Boyette and Dr. Alan Sowards, elementary education professor, to continue the development of curriculum and community partnerships for the Growing Minds SFA Butterfly Garden Project, training 535 pre-service teachers, 58 classroom



By 2001, word had spread that the gardens were a valuable educational resource, and the demand for year-round programs indicated a need for a full-time education coordinator position. A broad range of curriculum-based, hands-on science programs were soon developed for the K-8th grade, and volunteer teachers were recruited and trained. The SFA Elementary Education and SFA Gardens partnership continues to grow for the Bugs, Bees, Butterflies and Blossoms Festival, now reaching over 2,500 students annually. A one-week day camp for 6-10 year olds started in summer 2002, and adult programming was also added to meet the needs of the community.

Most recently, a Texas Parks and Wildlife Community Outdoor Outreach Program grant has allowed the expansion of the education program to include a weekly after-school program in partnership with the Boys and Girls Club of Nacogdoches as well as a monthly program held on weekends to include area families.

The number of program participants has steadily increased from 2,000 in 1999 to over 17,000 in 2010. Since 2005, each elementary student in Nacogdoches ISD has attended a hands-on science "Learning Excursion" at the SFA Gardens. Our summer camp program has expanded to include four weeks and ages 4-15 years.

The growth of the SFA Gardens facilities and education programs is a testament to building community partnerships, the importance of dedicated volunteers, student involvement, administrative support, generous donors, capable staff, an incredible vision, and generous amounts of hard work.

We look forward to creating an all-weather education facility at the Pineywoods Native Plant Center, continuing to evaluate and improve programming, nurturing partnerships, and, as always--educating, entertaining, and enlightening our visitors.

