

Dedication and Grand Opening of the Ruby M. Mize Azalea Garden
Remarks by Dave Creech, Director SFA Mast Arboretum
April 9, 2000

Welcome to the dedication of the SFA Ruby M. Mize Azalea Garden. Isn't this absolutely amazing? Two years ago this was a privet and greenbriar-infested jungle. Now we have a joyous garden, one created as an exercise of love, excitement, and challenges. From a disturbed and weedy eight-acre bottomland patch on SFA property, we now have a high-visibility, traffic stopping azalea garden – with patriarch trees to frame it all.



There are many reasons how all this happened. Right at the top would have to be the one that came from the heart of Ms. Dorothy Wisely. Her start-up gift and now an endowment guarantee a showcase for years to come. Named after her mother Ruby M. Mize, an avid gardener and lover of beauty, this azalea garden will be a wonderful legacy for the family to share with the community. It adds immensely to the class and character of our city. For Dottie – for her two daughters, Susan and Debbie, their husbands, Mike and David, respectively, for W.T. May, Ruby Mize's brother and for the rest of the family . . . we say thank you, thank you, thank you and we promise that this garden and her people will make you proud.

What we have here is a remarkable garden of plants. The diversity is exciting. Of course, the azalea collection is the future groundcover of this forest . . . besides a backbone of proven performers, this garden is home to many new azaleas – evergreen and deciduous, the result of breeding programs, plant explorations, and chance finds. The generosity of the nursery industry, breeders and enthusiasts has been amazing. The number of truck loads of plants from far away is testimony to the vision. In addition, this place is to be a showcase of Japanese and camellia varieties – we are well on our way to being one of the best, if not the best collections in the south. Don't ask me how many are planted – ask Barb. She can tell you that and when it was planted and probably who was there. Then, nestled here and there in this sun-lit Eden are many rare, new, difficult-to-find, and unusual cultivars of a wide range of species – dogwoods, Plum Yews, Chinese fringe flowers, among others. There are special plants here that are nowhere else. Horticulturally, it's certainly not boring.

I have always said it's people not plants that really make gardens and we have some good ones here. Barb Stump deserves all the kudos for making today happen. Grad student, Editor of the Azalea Society of America Journal, this garden's designer, juggling way too

much, grounded by the humor and class of Mike, and patient with the Director – she’s done it all. She has much to be very proud of.

Matt Welch our Azalea garden warrior – our full time Technician – someone who has led the charge here for a short seven months – and look at this place. Matt’s had to do it all. Supervised some great workers and some that need improvement – he’s built garden beds, planted, constructed trails, installed irrigation and fixed problems there, built a flagstone council ring, learned a lot about culverts, roads and drainage, and learned how to fight a pesky little critter called the azalea lace bug. All this in a short seven months and look at the place. Thank you Matt!

Thank you Adlai and Pat Mast for being here and for all that you’ve done to plan and plant for a better garden world in Nacogdoches. Your shot of adrenalin and support has helped create a Mast Arboretum team with four young, enthusiastic, vigorous, full-time folks driving the garden. Greg Grant, Dawn Parish, Matt Welch and I. OK, OK, maybe forget the young part for me but at least I’m enthusiastic. Greg really does bring amazing talent to the program; he’s cutting a wide swath in the gardening world, and has changed the look of the place. Dawn really is the queen of the garden and greenhouses and master of juggling chores, workers, plants, and equipment. For the most part, she does it all with grace and charm. There are way too many volunteers to thank – too many students, make them stand up. There are a lot of people making a mark here.

Of course, thanks to this administration and the Board of Regents for supporting the vision. The support of Roland Smith, Janelle Ashley is much appreciated. Thanks to the Physical Plant – James Harkness, John Rulfs, Gary Williams and Mark Holl – what a great team there for campus beauty! Thanks to the city and the community for the support and the good spirit we have here today.

Of course, only true gardeners know the truth. The success of this place is certainly here today but it’s not guaranteed for tomorrow. There are problems, backaches, headaches, and heartaches ahead. There’s plenty of hard work in front of us to keep us busy for years. Turning problems into challenges met and opportunities created is the fun part of gardening. Good gardeners are often stubborn, persistent and often a bit defiant. I always think of the following quote by Henry Mitchell in the *Essential Earthman*, a must read for any defiant gardener – it applies here for sure.

Henry Mitchell’s Essential Earthman:

“It is not nice to garden anywhere. Everywhere there are violent winds, startling once-per-five-centuries floods, unprecedented droughts, record-setting freezes, abusive and blasting heats never known before. There is no place, no garden, where these terrible things do not drive gardeners mad.”

All of that is true – except, of course, that last part; we’re not mad, today we’re about as happy as anyone can be. Thank you Dottie – and your family - for all the smiles you see today and for all those that will come in all the years ahead.