

Tom Johnson

# Romantic Garden Expert

By PJ Gartin

Tom Johnson, executive director of Magnolia Plantation and Gardens, is not only a tenacious horticulturist; he's also a modest man. However, don't let his, "Aww shucks ma'am, I'm just a poor farm boy," demeanor fool you. Although this former Perry, Georgia, Future Farmers of America member (he still has the navy-blue jacket to prove it) seems to get a kick out of allowing unsuspecting strangers to assume that he's a bona fide country bumpkin, in "real life," Johnson is responsible for orchestrating the complicated business of sustaining and protecting 500 acres of historically significant landscape. Approximately 10 miles north of downtown Charleston.

Magnolia Plantation, established 100 years before the American Revolution as a rice plantation, is now world-renowned for its romantic gardens. Listed on the National Register of Historic Places, these gardens were originally created for a homesick Yankee bride back in 1838. But by the turn of the 21st century, their breathtaking grandeur had slipped into faded gentility.

Magnolia was also once celebrated for its camellia propagation. The plantation sold them nationwide from the mid-1930s to late-1960s. In 2007, Magnolia's board of directors decided to revitalize the gardens by amassing the largest collection of ancient and historic camellias in North America. Johnson was a perfect fit to lead this effort, not only because he's an authority on camellia culture, but at the time, he was also managing the American Camellia Society's Masse Lane Gardens in Fort Valley, Georgia. But more importantly, he's an enthusiastic romantic garden expert and an advocate of its design philosophy – cooperate and embrace Mother Nature rather than fight her.

However, Johnson's philosophical approach to romantic gardening transcends maintaining rambling paths and natural settings. He is devoted to ensuring that every inch of the Magnolia's exquisite real estate – from the Swamp Garden and Cypress Lake to the Cattail Wildlife Refuge is conserved

and protected. He's also in the process of creating a children's enchanted forest that will surround the perimeter of Magnolia's campground and youth education area. His goal is "to encourage our young visitors to learn about nature [and] woodland habitats. My hope is that they will come away with the understanding

that we must protect the environment at all costs."

While his myriad responsibilities at Magnolia might intimidate even the most business-savvy horticulturist, Johnson has managed plant-related endeavors since he was a teenager. As he tells it, his dad thought Johnson needed something "useful" to do, so he set his son to truck farming. But now, instead of planting and selling tomatoes and squash, he ensures that tens of thousands of additional *Camellia*, crapemyrtles (*Lagerstroemia* spp.), and azaleas (*Rhododendron*

spp.) are planted throughout Magnolia.

So what does a busy man like Johnson do in his spare time? He tortures azaleas. But don't worry: It's all in the name of science. He's trying to develop a hybrid that blooms between spring and summer. Johnson is crossing Satsuki azalea, which blooms in summer, with the Southern Indian azalea, a species that blooms in spring. "I want a (hybrid) azalea to merge between the two," says Johnson. But to reach this goal, he must find a strain of Indian azalea that can take extremes of hot and cold

**Don't let Tom Johnson's "Aww shucks," demeanor fool you. He's an internationally respected authority on camellias and romantic gardens.**



**One of many romantic-style rambling paths at Magnolia Gardens.**

weather. "Actually, the Indians love hot and humid, but that doesn't mean their offspring will. Many of the early hybrids were not cold hardy and had to be grown in a greenhouse, which means some of the offspring will have traits that hate hot and humid, and others will not stand freezing weather, so all have to be tortured at both extremes," explains Johnson.

At first blush, a camellia authority like Johnson hybridizing azaleas instead of camellias at Magnolia might seem incongruous. However, at one time Magnolia Gardens & Nurseries' catalog offered 22 varieties of Indian azaleas. Johnson's latest endeavor is a continuation of his conviction to preserve the past while looking to the future. ☺

PJ Gartin has tended the same Charleston garden for more than 20 years. She is a freelance writer and the author of two gardening books.