



# The Old South Meets the New: The Atlanta Botanical Garden

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ABOVE: Visitors enter the 189-acre Atlanta Botanical Garden.



In early May I board a plane in Seattle, leaving tulips and gray spring days. Five hours later I step out of the airport in Atlanta into summer. Time travel.

Although I've traveled home for my nephew's wedding, I have arranged a tour of the Edible Garden at the Atlanta Botanical Garden (ABG) in downtown Atlanta, so I play hooky from family obligations and stay in a hotel near the garden, sitting out in the courtyard at 10 o'clock at night, reveling in the warm air. Ahh, I'm not in Seattle anymore....

I wake to a warm, blue-sky day and head to the garden where the shock of time travel catches up with me. Right after entering the garden I come to a glade with a waterfall, surrounded not by the expected rhodies but by hydrangeas in full bloom. Moments later I'm at the entrance to an allée of crape myrtles (*Lagerstroemia* 'Natchez') in bloom. Crape myrtles in bloom. In May. I am definitely not in Seattle anymore.

### Background

The Atlanta Botanical Garden is located in a corner of Piedmont Park, one of the great city parks of Atlanta. The park began its life in 1887 as the site for carriage races by the members of The Gentlemen's Driving Club. Shortly after its inception, the club members joined with the Piedmont Exposition Company so that the grounds could be used for fairs and expositions, undoubtedly hoping to make the Gentlemen a little money. The fairgrounds were christened Piedmont Park and the Gentlemen's Driving Club became the Piedmont Driving Club, which is still around, although carriage racing has given way to golf and squash.

The Park hosted quite a few fairs in its early years, most notably the 1895 Cotton States and International Exposition, a world's fair attended by over 800,000 people. It was here that Booker T. Washington gave his "Atlanta Compromise" speech, saying African-Americans would accept segregation and not advocate for more rights in

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ABOVE: The Edible Garden and Herb Wall at ABG.

return for free education in vocational fields and due process under law.

By the turn of the century, the Park—originally sited out in the boondocks—was enveloped by the growing city, and in 1904 the City of Atlanta bought the 189-acre property. They hired the prolific and peripatetic Olmstead Brothers to create a master plan that, over time, was only partially implemented.

Throughout the 20th, and into the 21st century, the Park has been both fairground and playground for Atlantans. In 1976, almost 90 years after its inception, a new component was added when 30 Park acres were leased to a fledgling group—the Atlanta Botanical Garden, Inc.—which immediately set up shop in a double-wide trailer and started amending the red Georgia clay.

### The Gardens

“The Southern Living Garden Book” published in 1998 says of southern gardeners, “We prefer the plants our parents grew, whether they be native or long-established exotics. Oh, from time to time we may flavor the stew with something new, but we never forsake the old family recipe.” This is the South of my childhood.

Despite living more than 20 years in Seattle, walking into the Atlanta Botanical Garden feels like coming home. There may be over a dozen different garden areas, a gigantic (16,000 square-foot) conservatory, and plenty of rare plants, but what stands out for me are those old Southern standbys: southern magnolias, hydrangeas, evergreen azaleas, dogwoods, scraggly loblolly pines and plenty of pine straw mulch.

This is a botanical garden so there is more to be seen than hydrangeas. Although with 160 cultivars of *Hydrangea macrophylla*, a trip to see just those would suffice for many. But I enjoy most the unexpected finds. A stunningly sculptural *Lagerstroemia fauriei* holds down a corner near the conservatory. Outside the café, a Chinese chestnut (*Castanea mollissima*) is in profligate bloom. A willow-leaf podocarp (*Podocarpus saligna*) nuzzles a Japanese

cryptomeria (*Cryptomeria japonica*) in the conifer garden. Quinine (*Parthenium integrifolium*), coffee (*Coffea* sp.), the chewing gum tree (*Manilkara chicle*), and other homely plants line the hallway of useful plants in the conservatory.

One can walk along the new “canopy walk” through the treetops of the Storza woods, but I find it more interesting on the forest floor, where small, unexpected gems are mixed in with the hostas and hydrangeas. I find a variegated Indian holly fern (*Arachnioides simplicior* ‘Variegata’), its yellow central stripe glowing. Elsewhere, a scattering of the tubular red flowers of the Southeast native Indian pink (*Spigelia marilandica*) brightens the forest floor. Native to the South it may be, but part of a Southern garden? Not very likely when I was growing up.

But change comes even to the South and is most evident at the ABG in the results of the recent capital campaign called the Green Expansion. A 95,000-gallon cistern was added. The new visitor center has a green roof. The demonstration kitchen in the Edible Garden features local chefs showcasing seasonal produce. Furthermore, many events are aimed at pulling in more visitors besides avid gardeners. There are yoga classes and concerts on the great lawn. I would have attended a “Cocktails in the Garden” night if I’d had the time. With a name like “Hydrangeas and Honeybees” (rum, honey and lemon), I could probably even have convinced my twenty-something nephews to go. Once again, the sense of unreality, of time travel, takes hold. All these amenities would seem just right in Seattle, but are at odds with the spark of the Southern belle that still resides within me. I’ve been gone a long time.

Based on what I saw at the ABG, I realized the South may be changing “the old family recipe” and hunted up the most recent (2004) edition of “The Southern Living Garden Book.” The old quote had disappeared, and in its place I found this: “For more than two centuries the South has prided itself on being a region apart—a place steeped in tradition, molded by family, and governed by seemingly limitless horizons.