

MAGNOLIA BOTANICAL GARDENS

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ABSTRACT: The objective of the Magnolia Botanical Gardens (MBG) is to establish an outdoor educational center integrating research, demonstration, and educational programs to promote landscape development and enhancement in communities in Mississippi. Home, street, and city landscaping projects result in not only an improved quality of life for citizens, but also economic benefits from increased property values of individual houses and neighborhood integrity. MBG will serve as an outdoor classroom to evaluate and demonstrate environmentally friendly landscape practices and plant material selection for both the landscape professional and the homeowner. MBG will also serve as an outdoor classroom for children to develop an appreciation for and expertise in sustainable landscape practices. Affiliated horticulture groups such as the Mississippi Master Gardeners, Northeast Mississippi Rose Society, North Mississippi Native Plant Society, and the Old South Iris Society have indicated a willingness to contribute to horticultural demonstration and educational programs at MBG. The Gardens will be open to the public and should develop into an outdoor destination for both gardeners and non-gardeners alike. This will contribute to the diversity of cultural enrichment opportunities available to citizens in Northeast Mississippi.

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MATERIALS AND METHODS: The Horticulture Research & Education Unit (HREU) in Verona was formed in 1996 in direct response to requests from citizens of north Mississippi for MSU to establish a horticulture research and information center in the Tupelo area. The establishment of HREU signaled a shift in the MAFES philosophy from research exclusively for traditional agriculture, represented by row crop and livestock production, to include service for homeowner horticulture and commercial landscape projects. The Magnolia Botanical Gardens project was initiated in 1996 after the Ornamental Horticulture Producer Advisory Committee recommended that the most valuable thing that the HREU could do for their industry would be to construct a botanical garden on the grounds of the MAFES branch station in Verona.

Construction and development of the landscape planting areas and hardscape features are the initial stages of the Magnolia Botanical Gardens project that must be completed before research, educational, and demonstration activities and programs can be conducted at MBG. Construction and reconstruction, planting and replanting will be a constant activity at MBG, but until the

initial construction is completed, development of the educational components of the project is delayed.

Landscape plans that delineate construction details for the overall project are requisite for further construction. Landscape architects have contributed a master plan that outlines the overall design and format for the project. What is needed now are plans detailing the placement and installation of infrastructure items such as irrigation, retaining walls, walkways, water features, trellises, arbors, and other essential hardscape and garden components.

After plans are drawn, landscape contractors will be hired to execute the construction necessary for plant bed installation. Construction of the underground irrigation systems and drainage lines must be completed and then buried before plant bed construction can begin. In fact, the bulk of the construction work and expense has to be completed before the first plant is transplanted into the Garden. Walkways constructed of various materials must be constructed; some, but not all of the pathways must be handicapped accessible. Retaining walls, arbors, and trellises will be constructed of varying materials

HREU professionals will work closely with landscape architects and landscape contractors hired for the project and will be on the site daily to oversee the work. The Magnolia Botanical Garden Advisory Board will help to guide the development and operation of MBG. Labor and management for maintenance of existing and future plantings and hardscapes will be supplied by HREU personnel.

The Rose Garden in the Formal Garden, the Annual Garden, the Natural Garden, and the Water Garden have been constructed and are being used for research, education, and demonstration activities. The areas of MBG that remain to be constructed include the Wildlife Garden, Perennial Garden, Demonstration Garden, and the Xeriscape Garden.

The Magnolia Botanical Gardens is an outdoor educational center that integrates research, demonstration projects, and education to promote the use of landscape plants for the enhancement of communities in Mississippi. Home, street, and city landscaping projects result in not only an improved quality of life for citizens, but also economic benefits such as increased property values of individual houses and integrity of neighborhoods.

Landscape plant material and cultural practice evaluations will be conducted by MAFES Mississippi Agricultural and Forestry Experiment Station research horticulturists stationed at the HREU in Verona. Included in the plant evaluations will be woody ornamentals, urban trees, under story street trees, and urban wildlife plants. Native plants and low maintenance plants that receive a minimum of pesticide protection and supplemental water will be evaluated for adaptability to Mississippi landscapes.

Educational programs will be conducted by the MSUES horticulture and forestry specialists that are stationed at the HREU in Verona. MBG will serve as an outdoor laboratory to evaluate and demonstrate energy and environmental friendly landscape practices and plant material selections for both landscape and horticulture professionals and the homeowner. MBG will also serve as an outdoor classroom for children to develop an appreciation for and expertise in horticultural and

environmental practices. The Gardens will be open to the public and should develop into an outdoor destination for both gardeners and non-gardeners alike.

The HREU research horticulturist, a PhD in horticulture with 10 years of research and 20 years of horticulture production experience, will oversee the construction and maintenance of MBG. Planting of the plant materials and turf areas as well as cultural practices including fertilization, irrigation, and pest control will be under his supervision. The staff for this aspect of the project will include a research assistant and a research technician from the HREU, plus a labor pool supplied by the Lee County Work Center. Master Gardeners from North Mississippi have committed to donate time and energy to help with planting and care of the various landscape plants. Additionally, the Northeast Mississippi Rose Society contributes time and money for the maintenance of the Rose Garden and the North Mississippi Native Plant Society has assumed the task of planting the Native Plant Garden. To date, contributions of plant materials from nurserymen and garden centers have supplied most of the plants growing in the MBG.

Education programs will be supervised by the MSUES consumer horticulture specialist stationed at the HREU. This individual has earned a PhD in horticulture and has over 20 years of horticulture production and educational experience. Master Gardeners will contribute time and expertise to the demonstration and educational programs. The horticulture specialist will supervise the educational activities of the Master Gardeners. Plans are currently developing for the formation of a horticulture information center at the HREU that will provide horticulture information and education programs to the gardening public. Education and demonstration programs will be conducted in the Gardens as appropriate for the program topic and availability of plant materials.