



# KALMIA GARDENS of COKER COLLEGE

Hartsville, South Carolina

By Ellen A. Vincent

Clemson University Environmental Landscape Specialist

Kalmia Gardens is a phenomenal ecosystem haven inconspicuously tucked into a quiet corner of South Carolina in the town of Hartsville, along the Black Creek. According to Dr. George Sawyer, former director and Coker College botany professor, it holds seven of South Carolina's 11 plant communities in one relatively small swath of land. These plant communities include a swamp forest, aquatics, a shrub bog, the savannah, the sand hills, an old field forest. This means that visiting scholars, tourists, or locals can experience the water, the deep swamp, or the forest on any one visit. There are also notable stands of the namesake mountain laurel (*Kalmia latifolia*) blooming in abundance during spring.

Natural beauty and diversity may be the foundation of Kalmia Gardens but are only accessible due to the extraordinary built features on the site. The area around the historic houses is more formal with brick, wood, and steel elements. The classic white arbors dripping with white roses are clearly a sirens call to a wedding party. Mature beech (a state champion) and sycamore overhang the formal landscape, softening all views. Paths of stone, mulch, brick, and board conduct people away from the structures into the secret

places, either deep in the primordial swamp on boardwalks or through the forest on a mulched path to a lily pond, or back in the woods to gaze at the elusive Atlantic white cedar (*Chamaecyparis thyoides*).

In addition to spectacular natural and built features, Kalmia Gardens is also a repository for stories. Mary Ridgeway, Director, can bring the past into bright focus by telling stories of "Miss May", May Roper Coker, the landscape gardener who turned the site into a botanical garden and arboretum between 1932 and 1965. Someone tried to purchase an Atlantic white cedar from Miss May once and her reply, reports Ridgeway, was "You don't have enough money to buy this tree." In 1966 May Roper Coker deeded the acreage to Coker College, along with an endowment for maintenance. Ridgeway, who came on board in 2007 is still struck by the awesome beauty and charm of the historic gardens and houses. "I feel very blessed to be chosen as this garden's guardian", she admits.

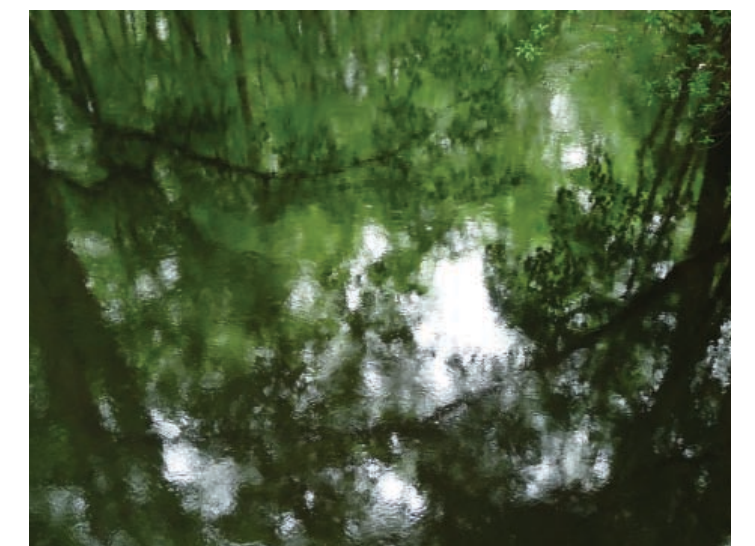
Ridgeway received her horticulture degree in plant sciences from Clemson University in 1984 and worked for SC Department of Agriculture and Markets before becoming director of Ka-

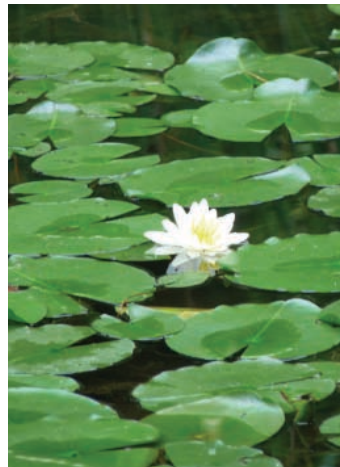
lmia Gardens. She is not an armchair administrator-she feeds the turtle in the education center, directs the power washing of the buildings and walks, and simply can't help but clip the azaleas overgrowing a path entrance. Ridgeway wasn't looking for a job in 2007 when she applied for the position of director which was becoming vacant due to George Sawyer's retirement. Her friends encouraged her to apply, and she laughingly remembers resurrecting her resume while sitting on the bleachers of the cattle barn at the State Fair in Columbia. In her role as director Ridgeway sees herself as both protector and funding finder.

Kalmia Gardens is a non-profit public garden affiliated with Coker College with a board of directors

and governed (but not financed) by the college. They make their way financially through endowment interest as well as membership and donation revenue. A 1998 capital campaign supported the installation of the formal gardens surrounding the historic Hart plantation house. There are two full time employees, Ridgeway and Dan Hill, plus one or two student gardeners to help during the summer and when school is in session. The facilities department at Coker College helps Kalmia Gardens with emergency and maintenance tasks that require highly skilled expertise.

Mary Ridgeway describes Kalmia Gardens as a spectacular four-season attraction. She often receives phone calls from potential visitors who ask "When is the best time to come and visit the





gardens?’ She replies “365 days a year. We don’t need azaleas to be attractive.” They hold a camellia collection of 200 mature plants, which include 100 named varieties. The winter garden is spectacular, reports Ridgeway due to the blooming camellias, tree structure, and 3,000 daffodils that are in heavy bloom from January to March.

Dan Hill is Assistant Director and naturalist extraordinaire for Kalmia Gardens. He holds a degree in biology, with a minor in chemistry and collateral in psychology from Francis Marion University. This background amply supports his role as educator at Kalmia Gardens. Hill teaches for the Master Gardener program, offers summer programs for school children, and provides engaging tours for scheduled groups. He is famous for allowing dragonflies to light on his nose during a tour, which they frequently do. He knows his snakes, and when he spies a non-poisonous one on tour he nonchalantly catches it and allows children to touch it—thereby helping to foster an interest in reptile identification as well as helping to discourage the inherent fear of snakes that many people experience. Hill claims, “If you learn you won’t be afraid.”

Hill’s main educational mission is to instill a notion of the importance of habitat. This lesson about connections is often easy while on tours. He found a spotted salamander one week and an elusive Rainbow snake another while leading a tour. He is quick to make the connection between the discovery of an unexpected plant or animal and the existence of a supportive habi-

tat for his students. It just so happens that Kalmia has a huge storm drain outlet that releases water from a residential subdivision located above the garden. And just below this lies the Black Creek. This makes the connection very clear for people when Hill explains that what comes in the water from above arrives into the river below. Hill’s students make birdhouses and bird feeders to further their understanding of the importance of habitats for species survival. When asked to describe the most common expression on the faces of his students, Hill replies, “Astonishment and accomplishment.” The most common reaction he sees in faces of people who are on their very first tour of Kalmia Gardens, reports Hill “Is amazement.”

Some of the environmental sustainable practices implemented at Kalmia Gardens include mulching, they have a fine arrangement with arborists in town who deliver chips for free; nutrient recycling, grass clippings are not bagged—rather they are left in place to restore nutrients to the soil; and water conservation, Hill recently installed four new rain barrels at the education center to catch the runoff from the roof to irrigate the new Discovery Garden. This new garden consists of raised contained beds, a composter, and is located near the education center. Indoor classes are held in the education center and resident reptiles include an intriguing iguana, a turtle, and a snake. Hill is also a proponent of integrated pest management practices and even though he is a certified pesticide applicator always considers mechanical eradication as the first step to controlling invasive

plant species. When Hill is confronted with a new problem, he admits his first line of defense is to ask himself, “What does Mary want and what would George [Sawyer] do?”

The former director of Kalmia Gardens, George Sawyer, devoted 30 years to developing the garden. Sawyer is an avid supporter of urban and community forestry and has ensured that the tree structure at Kalmia Gardens is healthy, beautiful, and sustainable. Ridgeway’s marketing skills (she has a compelling personality that exudes good will and cheerful optimism) and passionate commitment to stewardship of the grounds at Kalmia Gardens position her well to take the organization into the next stage of development. Long and short range planning projects involve grant writing and increasing plant collections. We can expect an increase in the numbers of flowering plants and butterflies at Kalmia Gardens during Ridgeway’s tenure. She also feels a unique sense of responsibility to the entire garden. She is unwavering in her commitment to protect

and nurture the plants, animals, and people connected to Kalmia Gardens.

Hill’s advice for newcomers to the public garden realm is “Be sure to pack a lunch, monetarily you won’t become rich.” The treasures, he reports, come in other ways. Having the ability to leave the office and lean up against a tree, shut his eyes, and simply listen to the sounds in the garden for a few minutes is priceless. This job also helps him express his explorer nature, “I see things that most people don’t, like the rare salamander last week. I never complain about coming to work.”

Ridgeway’s advice to newcomers is to be sure to enjoy people, “You need to interact and develop a great network of resources.” She also advises to be prepared for the unexpected and to have a very good sense of humor. When asked what she likes best about her job, she replies, “My favorite thing is knowing that I am caring for something so important, so special. It’s being a steward of green space.”

