



Well, *this* certainly doesn't seem right: November 11 is the beginning of the 2020 Masters Tournament in Augusta! I can only guess if their thousands of spring azaleas will have been replaced with countless camellia bushes, which typically start coming into bloom right about now.

When the tournament is, as usual, held in April, the Augusta National golf course is as beautiful as the commentators describe. The floral display of the azaleas and the dogwoods at each tournament is more memorable – to this observer, anyway - than the drama of the golf competition, and the perfectly timed display of spring's glory may have as many myths and stories told as the legendary tournament itself.

One persistent tale - apocryphal, according to official spokesmen from the Masters – concerns the remarkable timing of the flowering shrubbery. In order to assure that the explosion of blooms doesn't happen a week or two early, it is said that the groundskeepers have a buried system of pipes running through the flowerbeds of the enormous golf course. If an early warm spell threatens to rush the bloom prematurely, the team pumps cold water through the pipes to fool the azaleas and the dogwoods into delaying their flowers.

I hasten to confirm the officials' denial: many years, we who live in the vicinity of Augusta have

watched with anxiety as an early heat wave has forced spring to arrive long before the Masters. It is always a point of concern, but obviously of far more concern to those producing the Masters for worldwide viewing: those years, the Masters must make do with strategically placed potted azaleas to obscure the fact that every last azalea on the grounds has already blown its chance to shine for the cameras. Remember that next April as you peer through a screen of azaleas to watch a fairway shot with nary a bloom beneath the pines. So much for cooling pipes under the ground.

Rarely do the commentators and the golf writers remember to mention the source of that horticultural magnificence for which the Augusta National is rightly celebrated. When founders of the golf club, Bobby Jones and Cliff Roberts, opened their new course to play in 1933, they had an existing property already landscaped with rare and beautiful plants. The property had formerly been the site of Louis and Prosper Berckmans' Fruitland Nursery, reputedly the first large commercial plant nursery in the South, founded in 1858, although that claim might be disputed by the Pomaria Nursery, founded by the Summers brothers in Newberry, South Carolina, in 1840.

The Berckmans home was situated at the highest point on the several hundred acre property, and the nursery provided the trees to form the magnificent allée of *Magnolia grandiflora* along the entry drive from Washington Road to the manor house site. (My mother recalls riding through this famous allée as a child with her grandmother to take tea with Mrs. Berckmans.

At about the same time as the Berckmanses were establishing their nursery and planting their grand allée of



magnolias, Governor James Henry Hammond was building his showplace plantation, Redcliffe, across the Savannah River in Beech Island, SC. He, too, wanted an allée of magnolias, so he

ordered dozens from Fruitland Nurseries to plant an avenue as grand as the Berckmanses' own, and as dramatic as any processional allée of the seats of European nobility.

The magnolias at Redcliffe were matched by other acquisitions Hammond made from the Berckmanses: Spanish cork oak trees; crape myrtles; blue Atlas cedars. Fruitland Nursery offered dozens of varieties of peach trees, apples, and pears. Grapes – the European wine grapes, *Vitis vinifera*, were tried repeatedly, but, unlike the native grapes, failed repeatedly in the Southern soils and climate.

The nursery in Augusta continued to expand its offerings and to increase its plantings over much of the acreage above Rae's Creek. The Berckmanses constantly introduced into American commerce new ornamental garden plants and developed and improved fruit and nut varieties. Their influence is still powerful in horticultural offerings today.

The very best ornamental yellow jessamine, *Gelsemium sempervirens*, the state flower of South Carolina and one of the loveliest – and earliest – climbing flowering vines in the garden, is the one called Pride of Augusta. It's a superb double-flowered form with rich coloring and dense growth habit; and it's a Fruitland Nursery introduction.

Perhaps the most ubiquitous ornamental shrub throughout the south is the azalea, and the type which is most closely associated with southern gardens is the Hybrid Belgian Indica Azalea, *Rhododendron x*, also called the Southern Indica hybrid azalea. Perhaps no one has done more to spread the planting of the Belgian Indicas than these Belgian immigrant nurserymen in Augusta; and perhaps no introduction of theirs has had such impact, largely because of the spectacular use of these particular azaleas during the Masters Tournament.

