

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

Gardenias, Magnolias and Oleanders

Gardenia jasminoides is cultivated throughout the gardens of New Orleans as a sweet-scented flowering shrub. The *Gardenia* is a genus of 142 species of flowering plants in the coffee family, *Rubiaceae*, native to the tropical and subtropical regions of Africa, southern Asia, Australasia and Oceania. Several species occur on the island of Hawaii, and it is known to many people in New Orleans as Cape jasmine.

Since this species originated in warm humid tropical areas, it demands high humidity to thrive and bright (not direct) light. It flourishes in acidic soils with good drainage and thrives in Crescent City temperatures. Flowering is from about mid-spring to mid-summer, with May the predominant month.

The stunningly beautiful shrub with the fragrant white flowers did not derive its name from "the garden", however. It all began in Charleston, South Carolina, where there lived a Scottish-born botanist named Dr. Alexander Garden. He was a member of several learned societies and was a fellow of the Royal Society in London. He collected all manner of flora and fauna, which he packed up and sent to London zoologist John Ellis and famous Swedish naturalist Carl Linnaeus. He bundled up and sent them various magnolias and some *Gordonia* specimens, but the plant that bears his name had nothing to do with his particular efforts. It wasn't even American. Linnaeus was strongly persuaded by Ellis to name something after Garden, so the *Gardenia* became the name for the Cape jasmine, also known as Cape jessamine.

The national flower of Pakistan, the *Gardenia* is popular in France and other countries as a boutonnière. Victorian ladies knew the symbolism of certain floral gifts. The *Gardenia* signified either "you are lovely" or "secret love, purity", depending on the authority. According to the Society of American Florists, the meaning is "joy". In the Chinese tradition, the representation is one of "feminine grace, subtlety, and

artistry". According to "The Meaning of Flowers ~ Myth, Language & Lore ~" by Gretchen Scoble and Ann Field:

"In the American South, the gardenia stands for hospitality, for the grace of the southern style of life. Its fragrant blooms perfume the streets of the French Quarter in New Orleans.

In the nineteenth century in England, the elegant gardenia was one of the few flowers considered suitable to adorn the lapel of a gentleman's formal evening jacket. Any more extravagant a bloom might have been in bad taste."

In 1960, rock and roll artist Gary U.S. Bonds had his first big hit with the song "New Orleans". Reaching #6 on the Billboard Chart, he sang out the words:

"Every Southern belle is a Mississippi queen,
Down the Mississippi,
Down in New Orleans.

Come on take a stroll down to Basin Street
And listen to the music with the Dixieland beat.
The magnolia blossoms fill the air
And if you ain't been to heaven, then you ain't been there."

Edgar "Big Boy" Myles recorded the local version of "New Orleans" for Ace Records, also in 1960. It's no wonder that "magnolia blossoms fill the air" in the Crescent City. The Southern Magnolia (*Magnolia grandiflora*) has been the state flower of Louisiana since 1900 and Mississippi (officially since 1952). Mississippi's state tree is also *Magnolia grandiflora*, while Louisiana's is the bald cypress.

During the summer, the state is overflowing with an abundance of magnolia tree blossoms. The large and creamy white blooms of the magnolia flower have an especially rich fragrance. The magnolia tree is an evergreen.

In 1703, French botanist Charles Plumier (the genus *Plumeria* is named for him) gave a flowering tree from the island of Martinique the genus name *Magnolia* (for another French botanist, Pierre Magnol). Carl Linnaeus, once again, took it from there.

Magnolia is a large and ancient genus of about 210 flowering plant species. It evolved on the planet before the appearance of bees, and its flowers developed so as to encourage pollination by beetles. As a result, the spirally arranged carpels in the flower's center are tough. At maturity they develop into a woody, cone-like aggregate of bright scarlet seed-bearing follicles. Another primitive aspect of magnolias is

their lack of distinct sepals or petals. Because they are similar in size and shape, the flower's numerous sepals and petals are called tepals. Fossilized specimens of the *Magnoliaceae* have been found dating back to over 95 million years ago. First to cultivate magnolias were the Chinese, who cherished them for their beauty, and flavored soups with their buds. There the magnolia is an emblem of gentleness and feminine beauty. Centuries later, the laurel-leaved garden magnolia expressed dignity to the Victorians. In the American South, the magnolia is the tree of society, perfuming the cotillion on a Southern night.

Ancient beyond one's imagination, many magnolias were no match for the flood waters of Hurricane Katrina. Those that were submerged too long did not survive.

In New Orleans, *Magnolia* has many other meanings. It may bring to mind the Magnolia Mansion (the Harris-Maginnis House on Prytania, dating back to 1857). Or it could refer to the Magnolia Housing Projects (officially the C.J. Peete Projects). Bounded by Louisiana Avenue, South Claiborne Avenue, La Salle Street and Washington Avenue, the Magnolia Projects' A.L. Davis Park on La Salle has long been a frequent gathering site for brass band parades and Mardi Gras Indian tribes. In 1964, Theodore Emile "Bo" Dollis became "Big Chief" of "The Wild Magnolias". Six years later, "The Wild Magnolias" recorded a single entitled *Handa Wanda* for the Crescent City label, produced by Quint Davis. It's still a Mardi Gras favorite nearly 30 years later. And to others, Magnolia Hawks is a principal character in the famous musical "Showboat". The story revolves around her love for charming Mississippi gambler, Gaylord Ravenal.

The LSU-Ole Miss college football rivalry is known as the Magnolia Bowl, but (to Southern ladies and Uptown *grandes dames*) a magnolia bowl is always one or two beautiful magnolia blossoms floating in a shallow bowl of water on the dining room table. And during warm winters, magnolias often adorn under-utilized New Orleans fireplaces.

And then there are the memorable words from the song "Do You Know What It Means To Miss New Orleans", especially Louis Armstrong's rendition:

"The moonlight on the bayou,
A Creole tune that fills the air.
I dream of oleanders in June,
And soon I'm wishin' I was there."

Nerium oleander, like the *Gardenia*, is also an evergreen shrub or small tree in the dogbane family *Apocynaceae*. It is the only species currently classified in the genus *Nerium*. Oleander has a prolific presence on many New Orleans neutral grounds (or to use the

vernacular outside the Crescent City), it is commonly used to landscape freeway medians in other mild-winter states because it is easily maintained. It is also one of the most poisonous of commonly grown garden plants, and can be very toxic if ingested in sufficient quantity.

The oleander flowers grow in clusters at the end of each branch, in colors of white, pink, yellow or red. *Nerium oleander* is native to an extensive area ranging from Morocco and Portugal eastward through the Mediterranean region and southern Asia to the southern parts of China.

There is a story that claims that some of Napoleon's soldiers in Spain died when they used oleander branches to roast meat. Kabob lovers beware. Do not search for skewers on the neutral grounds. Play it safe with Byblos, Mona's or Lebanon's Café.

In the Anya Seton novel "Dragonwyck", the oleander plant and its deadly effect are essential to the plot. The botanical killer can be seen in the 1946 film of the same name. The 1999 book "White Oleander" by Janet Fitch was also made into a movie three years later, and poisoning using the oleander plant is central to its plot.

Poisonous as they are, their beauty draws us back. New Orleans natives far from home do indeed "dream of oleanders in June", gardenias on lapels and large creamy white magnolias floating in shallow bowls.

They love camellias, too, but that's a story for another time.

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