

John Allen Smith 1936—1999

Larry Langford

John Allen, former President of the Magnolia Society, died Monday, July 12, 1999. His garden and plant collection were famous throughout the United States and much of Europe and Asia. Many of our gardens are graced with plants he introduced, among which are a number of Gresham's hybrid magnolias (Jon Jon, Winelight, Candy Cane, Dark Shadow, Full Eclipse, Sangreal), *Magnolia grandiflora* Fairhope and *Illicium floridanum* Halley's Comet. Nursery catalogs also list selected *M. virginiana* var. *australis* clones and various forms of *Ilex*. John Allen had a good eye for excellence in plants and a tremendous enthusiasm for searching for them in the wilds of southern Mississippi and Alabama near his home and garden, which is near Chunchula, a small community a few miles north of Mobile, Alabama.

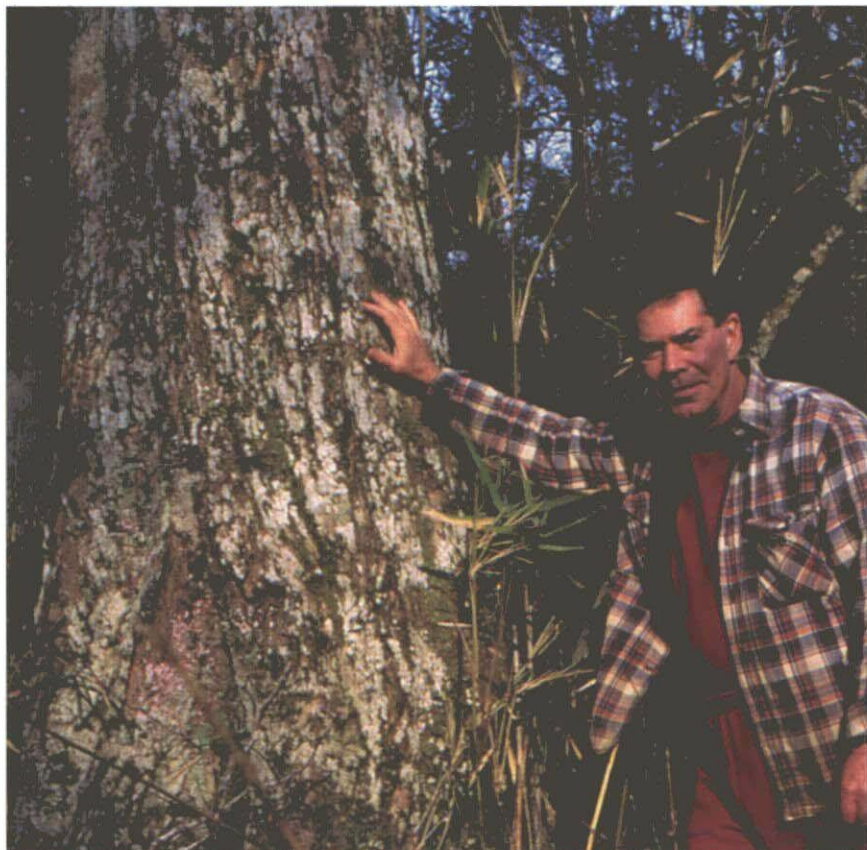
While I met John Allen at my first TMS annual meeting in Lafayette, Louisiana, I first really became acquainted with him one beautiful spring afternoon when we chanced upon each other at Kew. We had recently attended the Magnolia Society tour of Cornwall and were seeking out any late blooming magnolias at the botanic garden. In an afternoon I found a gardening mentor and a friend. John Allen's knowledge of plants was near encyclopedic. Indeed, on any scientific topic he would amaze with his breadth of understanding and interest. This was the first of many enjoyable days spent visiting gardens with John Allen—certainly not the least of these, his own.

To receive a phone call in the midst of winter announcing the magnolias are in bloom, why don't you drive down this weekend was the best possible harbinger of spring. A weekend with John Allen and Fran Smith was one of the great delights of this world. Whether in John Allen's outside domain or Fran's inside one, it really didn't matter whether the spring weather held up. I recall arriving late one Friday evening and being greeted by John Allen with flashlights. "It's going to frost tonight" he said, "come on." And off to the garden we

went, viewing the magnificent display of magnolias by flashlight! Another time, the weather wasn't even that kind. I observed frosted blooms fully an hour north of Chunchula. Nothing would be left. As every gardener must realize, especially one who plants and loves magnolias, alternative plans must be made. So off we went to seek *Asarum arifolium* and any other plants that caught our fancy in the limestone ridges breaking east-west through southern Mississippi and Alabama. That the woods were full of *Magnolia grandiflora*, *M. virginiana* var. *australis*, *M. tripetala*, and *M. macrophylla* was just icing on the cake. Another visit ended in a drive to Gloster, Mississippi where we, along with John Giordano, explored the planting of Gresham hybrids at the Gloster Arboretum. It was from here that the Gresham hybrids named by Magnolia Nursery were selected.

The Smith garden was not just a spring display. In summer, the pools, and even the lake until the beavers lined up to feast, were a riot of tropical water lilies. John Allen loved gingers and brugmansias, and the garden abounded in them. The mild climate and a very long growing season insured that the latter reached impressive size. Their perfume filled the summer evening air. Camellias and native azaleas and hybrids were there in the hundreds. Major planting of bamboos drifted over the hillside as you entered the long drive to the nursery and house. Herbaceous plants in great profusion were under planted with the magnolias and other trees. It was a garden of never ending discovery.

John Allen and Fran played host to gardeners the world over. Their guest book would be a veritable who's who of the plant world and included the Magnolia Society on two occasions. John Allen served two terms as president of the Magnolia Society, and it was during his administration that our first meeting was held outside the United States. He served on the board and several committees during his years of active membership in our society. As a friend he can never be replaced. Like many, a walk around my own garden is a joyful reminder of a warm and generous man. Indeed his generosity populated much of my garden. Each plant is his memorial, and I treasure each and every one of them.



*John Allen Smith standing next to a *M. virginiana* var. *australis*—a large (wild) tree growing on a favored area of his property in Chunchula, Alabama. Richard Figlar took this photo in March, 1999.*

John Allen is survived by his wife, Fran Tatum Smith; three daughters, Melanie Turner, Lynn Hairston, and Cathy Smith; two stepdaughters, Jamie Watt and Cindy Winkler; his brother, R. L. Smith; his mother, Mattie Mae Smith; and two grandchildren. ❧