



Camellia Club of Mobile

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April 2026

Monthly Meeting Info

April 12, 2026

Building opens 1:00 p.m.

Potluck prep 1:30 p.m.

Potluck Social 2:00 p.m.

Meeting begins 2:30 p.m.

Meeting Location

Jon Archer Agricultural Center

1070 Schillinger Rd. N

Mobile, AL 36608

NOTE: This is our last regular meeting this term. During this meeting we will discuss our May end-of-year party. Our next regular meeting will be Sept. 13th.



Blooms: If you have any late blooms please bring them to our meeting for show and tell.

At our March meeting, President Larry Heard presented an informative and hands-on demonstration on air-layering camellias. In a detailed, step-by-step presentation, he walked members through the process—from selecting the proper branch to preparing and securing the air layer—sharing helpful tips to increase success. Members especially appreciated the clear explanations and the practical hand-out provided to take home for reference.

In addition to propagation techniques, the group also discussed the importance of proper fertilization for healthy growth and abundant blooms. Timing, type of fertilizer, and application methods were reviewed, offering helpful reminders as we move into the growing season.



As usual this time of camellia season, members brought in gorgeous blooms to share.



At the end of our meeting our usual monthly raffle was held and six lucky members went home with new camellia plants!





Bellingrath Gardens, the Bellingraths, and Camellias

By Maureen Ryan Kennedy

A Garden Opens to the Public

Bellingrath Gardens & Home was the creation of Mr. and Mrs. Walter Bellingrath, who transformed a quiet riverside property on Fowl River into one of the South's best-known display gardens. The Gardens first opened to the public on April 7, 1932, after Mr. Bellingrath placed a simple newspaper notice inviting visitors to enjoy the spring azaleas.

The response was so enthusiastic that the Gardens soon expanded to year-round public access beginning in 1934.

From the beginning, the Bellingraths envisioned a landscape that would offer beauty in every season.

Mrs. Bellingrath's Vision: "Color and Beauty" Year-Round

Bessie Morse Bellingrath believed two plants were essential to the garden's design — azaleas for spring and camellias for winter. With the help of architect George B. Rogers, she sought out large, established specimens to create an immediate and lasting display.

During the Great Depression, she was also known for purchasing plants directly from local families, often camellias and azaleas growing in their own yards, for hundreds of dollars. These purchases not only enriched the Gardens but quietly helped neighbors who needed the income — a kindness still remembered today.

A Family Footnote Family lore says Mrs. Bellingrath once tried to purchase a camellia from my grandmother, Marie Ryan—who politely refused to part with it. My grandfather, Harry F. Ryan, Sr., told her she should have sold it!



Mr. Bellingrath's Favorite Flower — A Lasting Camellia Legacy

Camellias soon became one of Bellingrath's defining features. Over time, the Gardens developed one of the most significant collections in the region and became a gathering place for camellia enthusiasts throughout the Gulf Coast.

Bellingrath has hosted more American Camellia Society tours and meetings than any other public garden in the country and was selected in 2008 as one of the inaugural American Camellia Trail Gardens — a testament to its national importance in camellia history.

After Walter Bellingrath's death, camellia friends proposed honoring his memory with something lasting and meaningful.

The Camellia Arboretum

In 1957, the Gardens planted over 800 camellia cultivars across seven shaded acres, creating a dedicated camellia arboretum beneath tall yellow pines. Grass paths wound gently through the trees, inviting visitors to stroll among winter blooms.

For many, it became a place of pilgrimage — quiet, shaded, and filled with color during the coldest months of the year.







Storms, Fire, and Resilience

Like much of the Gulf Coast, Bellingrath's beauty has also been tested by nature.

Hurricane Camille in 1969 brought heavy wind and flooding that toppled trees and reshaped the landscape. For me, it also carried a personal loss — Camille blew down my *favorite tree* beside the flower bed halfway up the sand path along the Great Lawn. As a child growing up on the property I had always thought that tree would be there forever! I couldn't understand how something so big could simply be gone. Even now, whenever I walk past the Great Lawn, I still catch myself looking for it.

But while that loss felt enormous to me, the garden quietly carried on. By winter, the camellias were blooming again — bright, steady, and resilient — a gentle reminder that even after the storms, Bellingrath would endure.

A decade later, Hurricane Frederic in 1979 delivered even greater devastation. That night, we sheltered with another family inside the Gardens' entrance building while the winds howled and whistled through the canopy without pause — so loud and constant you could not even hear the massive oaks and pines crashing to the ground. By morning, thousands of trees lay toppled. Paths disappeared, flower beds were buried in debris, and the beloved camellia arboretum was destroyed.

After the storm, aerial views showed multiple tornado tracks cutting through the property. Just over 2,000 trees were downed and nearly 23,000 shrubs damaged or crushed. When it became clear the arboretum could not be restored in its original form, surviving camellias were carefully dug, salvaged, and replanted throughout other areas of the Gardens. The arboretum itself was closed and slowly, over time, reclaimed by nature.

Much of the recovery fell to Pat Ryan, this author's father and the Gardens' longtime Director of Horticulture, whose deep love for the property and tireless commitment guided the restoration. If not for his determination to salvage, replant, and rebuild, the future of the Gardens — and its camellia collection — might have looked very different.



Harry F. "Pat" Ryan, my father and Bellingrath's longtime Director of Horticulture—a graduate of McGill Institute (McGill-Toolen High School) and Alabama Polytechnic Institute (Auburn University), who also shared his expertise through a regular newspaper column and appearances on local television and radio, whose dedication and love for the Gardens helped ensure their restoration and future.

Then, in March 1981 — the very week of my wedding, with my reception planned at the Gardens — a fire swept through the surrounding wooded areas, fueled by the extensive debris and downed trees left in the wake of Hurricane Frederic. The blaze further altered the landscape and damaged many of the remaining pines. I remember getting a call at work telling me to rush home and move things out of the house, including my wedding dress, as the flames spread close to our house. It was both frightening and heartbreaking to think such a joyful week could be overshadowed by the very real threat of losing everything. Thankfully, the house was spared and the wedding went on as planned, with our reception at the Gardens. You could still smell smoke lingering in the air from the mostly extinguished fires. Once again, the Gardens endured and rebuilt, proving their quiet strength and resilience.



Parking lot immediately after Hurricane Frederic, so filled with downed trees we couldn't leave the property for weeks.



The iron gate and fence, barely visible after being crushed by fallen trees during Hurricane Frederic.



The Conservatory after Hurricane Frederic—damaged but still sheltering my dad’s beloved orchids.



Maureen and co-worker Laura Phillips taking a quick Coke break during the exhausting days of clean-up after Hurricane Frederic, as chainsaws worked constantly to clear paths through the fallen trees.

A Living Garden

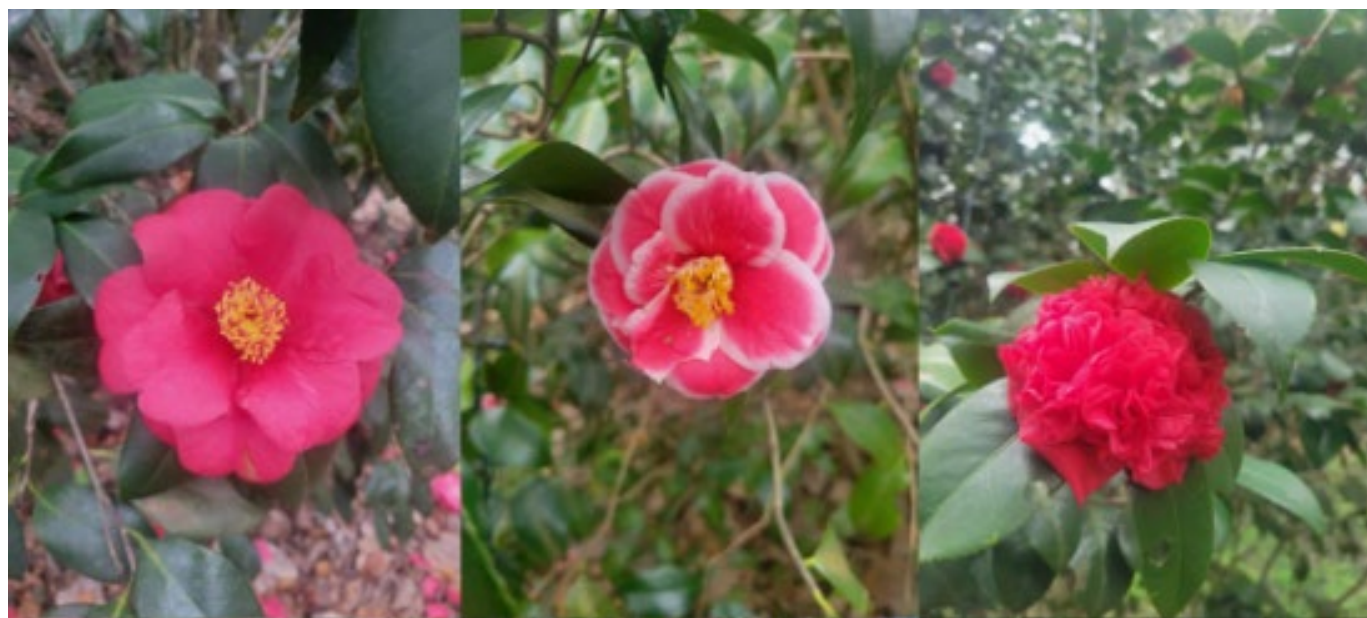
Today, visitors may not realize how many times Bellingrath has been reshaped by storms, fire, and hardship. Yet perhaps that is part of its story — a garden not only of beauty, but of perseverance.

In recent years, the Gardens have begun the long process of restoring the camellia arboretum. Old paths are being rediscovered and thoughtfully replanted. Time and overgrowth has hidden the original layout, but the spirit of the place remains.

I still remember those winding grass paths through the camellias and tall pines, the filtered light through the trees, and a small wooden bridge crossing a quiet stream. It was simply a peaceful place where it often felt like you had the arboretum all to yourself — and, as a young girl living there, where I rode my bike.

Seeing camellias return to that space feels like a homecoming. Having grown up on the property and witnessed both the devastation and the rebuilding, this renewal is deeply meaningful to me.

A sampling of the hundreds of camellias in bloom at Bellingrath Gardens, January 2026 --









Camellia Arboretum Restoration Underway

On February 28, volunteers joined Bellingrath's horticulture team for a meaningful milestone in the Gardens' history — the planting of more than 100 camellias as part of the ongoing restoration of the Camellia Arboretum. It marked the first large-scale planting in the arboretum in over 50 years and a significant step toward returning this cherished space to its former beauty.

Working side by side with staff, participants helped place each camellia in the ground, contributing not only their time and effort, but becoming part of the Gardens' living legacy. For many, the day was about more than planting shrubs — it was about giving back to a place that holds deep personal meaning and helping ensure that future generations will once again stroll shaded paths lined with winter blooms.

Seeing new camellias take root in the historic arboretum feels like the beginning of a long-awaited homecoming. The restoration will take time, but with each planting, the landscape moves one step closer to the garden so many of us remember and love.



Pictured above: Jeremy Schmidt, Sarah Brecher, and Seth Allen, members of Bellingrath's horticulture team, leading the Camellia Arboretum restoration, guiding volunteers in the first large-scale planting in over 50 years.

Pictured below: George Davis, a dedicated member of the Camellia Club of Mobile, hard at work planting new camellias as part of the restoration effort. His commitment and hands-on support help ensure the beauty of these gardens for years to come. Also pictured are fellow volunteers and camellia enthusiasts whose hard work and shared passion are helping bring the garden back to life.



And one last surprise on my recent visit to Bellingrath...

Tucked quietly off the path near the rose garden — the part of the Gardens I always think of as my dad's, since he cared for the roses and conservatory (known as the Exotica Conservatory and filled with my dad's orchids) — I noticed something unexpected growing among the camellias: a kumquat tree, blooming and thriving.

The staff isn't quite sure how it got there or when it was planted. My first thought, of course, was that it must be my dad's doing. He loved kumquats, and I can just imagine him slipping a few seeds into the soil years ago, never imagining what they might become.

Then again, it's just as likely a squirrel got hold of one of Dad's discarded kumquats while he was working in his little workroom in the brick building behind the conservatory and "planted" it up in the trees near the rock bridge at the entrance to the rose garden.

Either way, unexpectedly coming upon that thriving tree felt special — like finding a small piece of him still there — a gentle reminder that gardens, and memories, have a way of taking root when you least expect them.



Sources: Information drawn from Bellingrath Gardens & Home historical materials, along with the author's personal recollections and family papers preserved from her parents.

**For additional information regarding
Camellia Club of Mobile please visit
our website:**

<http://www.mobilecamellia.org/>

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