

Georgia's iconic horticultural wonders

It's hard to live in Georgia without hearing about the hedges at Sanford Stadium in Athens. Each spring, Thomasville's Rose Show and Festival draws thousands of visitors to the state's official "Rose City."

But have you heard the story behind Macon's historic Yoshino cherry trees? And did you know that the American Camellia Society is headquartered in central Georgia?

What do a massive winter-blooming garden, trees from Japan, the Georgia Bulldogs' hedges and a festival's famous roses have in common? These landmarks are all part of Georgia's rich horticultural heritage.

Here's a closer look at the stories behind these Georgia treasures.

The winter rose

Showing their colors when almost every other plant is tucked in for the cold, camellias have earned the nickname "the winter rose."

"With more than 1,000 varieties in bloom at Masee Lane Gardens [near Fort Valley] from the fall through early spring, we have one of the finest collections of camellias in the world," says Matthew Israel, executive director of the American Camellia Society, headquartered at the gardens.

The blooms' colors include white and shades of pink and red, with solid or variegated petals.

Camellia sasanqua blooms in the fall, has small flowers and grows in sunny landscapes. *Camellia japonica* varieties blossom from early winter into the spring; their flowers are showy, and they prefer to be planted in shadier spots.

"These two species of camellias are prominent in the South, and both are simply stunning and easy to grow," he says. "Japonica blooms can [come in many forms], but don't sell sasanquas short. As the harbingers of winter, their fall single or double flowers add an abundance of color to the landscape."

To see camellias at their peak, visit Masee Lane Gardens during the Festival of Camellias Feb. 1-28, with guided tours given by experts.

"Camellias have earned their place in Southern



PAMELA A. KEENE

An up-close view of a *Camellia japonica* 'Debutante' bloom shows its delicate petals and vibrant pink hue.

gardens," Israel says. "Their blossoms shine bright in the winter, putting on spectacular shows when almost nothing else is blooming."

For more information, visit americancamellias.com.

Paint the town pink

Each spring, Macon transforms into a sea of pink with thousands of Yoshino cherry trees. The International Cherry Blossom Festival celebrates the blooms March 21-30.

Macon real estate agent William A. Fickling Sr. is credited with introducing Yoshino cherry trees to Macon in the early 1950s after a trip to Washington, D.C., during its Cherry Blossom Festival.

"He was so impressed with the mass of blossoms [that] he began propagating the trees and giving them away across the city," says Michael Glisson, director of parks for Macon-Bibb County. "In 1973, Keep Macon-Bibb Beautiful Commission chair Carolyn Crayton asked Fickling to donate approximately 500 trees if she organized the planting."

By 1982, the city was awash with pink each March, and Crayton created the first International Cherry Blossom Festival.

Over the decades, Macon has planted, gifted and sold thousands of Yoshino cherry trees. Last year, as part of a restoration effort, the city planted 100 to 150 more Yoshino cherry trees along with numerous early-blooming Okami cherry trees and late-blooming Kwanzan cherry



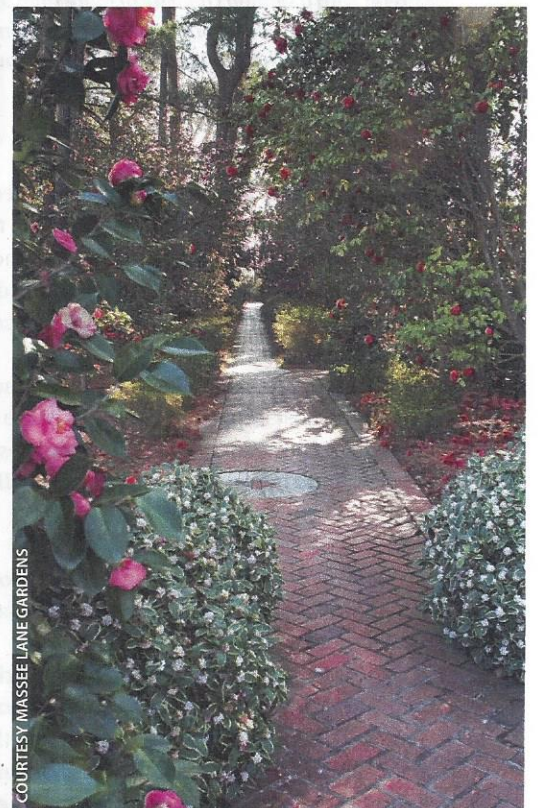
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trees with powder-puff-shaped blooms. These new varieties were planted to help extend the blooming season.

“Coleman Hill Park just north of downtown has one of the most beautiful views when the cherry blooms are at their peak,” Glisson says. “You’ll see thousands of light-pink trees across the city, coloring the area in their delicate blooms. It’s quite a sight to see.”

For more information, visit cherryblossom.com.

The Rose City

This year, Thomasville hosts its 104th Thomasville Rose Show and Festival April 25-26. With more than 1,500 roses in public gardens and parks, the city earned its official designation as “Georgia’s Rose City” in 2016.

Brian Allensworth, Thomasville’s urban landscape manager since 2016, often spends his sunny days in the rose gardens with a sharp pair of clippers.

“There’s always something to do to ensure that our roses are healthy, disease-free and filled with blooms,” he says. “I may be deadheading old blossoms to make way for new buds, pruning older branches, fertilizing or spraying.”

The city maintains formal rose beds planted with hybrid tea roses and grandiflora varieties in several parks. The formal rose gardens are divided

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Top left: A pathway is framed by Yoshino cherry trees in downtown Macon. The city has more than 350,000 cherry trees—the largest concentration of these blossoms anywhere in the world. **Top right:** Thomasville’s rose gardens feature a variety of bloom colors. **Above left:** With a 24-foot circumference and a canopy spanning more than 160 feet, the Big Oak in Thomasville is supported by an intricate system of cables to preserve it for future generations. **Above right:** A brick path between towering camellia plants leads visitors through a serene garden at Masseur Lane Gardens near Fort Valley.



COURTESY UGA ATHLETICS

Above: With a seating capacity of more than 92,000, Sanford Stadium is one of the largest venues in college football. **Right:** The hedges add a signature touch to the game-day atmosphere in Sanford Stadium.



COURTESY UGA ATHLETICS

into four themes: famous people, the armed forces/public servants, love and holidays. The themes are represented through the arrangement and selection of rose varieties as well as the landscaping and design elements within specific areas of the garden. Roadside and sidewalk plantings that feature Knock Out roses, shrub roses and carpet roses complement the formal gardens.

“We work to have color at least three seasons of the year,” Allensworth says. “The most important time—when we count on really colorful displays—is our annual Rose Show and Festival.”

For more information, visit thomasvillega.com/rose.

Between the hedges

Just say “between the hedges” and sports fans across the country think of Sanford Stadium and the iconic 5-foot-tall hedges that surround Vince Dooley Field.

Prior to the 2024-25 season, the historic hedges experienced their third renovation since they became part of the lore surrounding the University of Georgia (UGA) Bulldogs. Planted in 1929, the original shrubs of *Ligustrum sinense*, otherwise known as Chinese privet, were first replaced immediately after the 1996 Summer Olympics, when Sanford Stadium was used for the soccer matches.

“At that time, it turned out that they were diseased, so they had to be replaced,” says Matt Hollan, UGA director of athletic fields and grounds.

In 2016, the hedges were removed temporarily to make way for the west end zone expansion that began in 2017 and was completed in summer 2018. The plants installed after the Olympics were replanted.

“At that time, a local grower took cuttings of the plants with the goal to have new shrubs when the time came,” he says.

Chinese privet typically lives from 20 to 40 years, so after the 2023-24 football season officials decided it was time to replace them.

“Last February we did a complete restoration of the hedges, replacing the soil and working on the irrigation and drainage system,” he says. “Four hundred shrubs were planted.

“They’re the sons and daughters of the original hedges—the same genetic material as in 1929. In all those decades, we’ve maintained the heritage of the hedges.”

For more information, visit bit.ly/abouthedges or bit.ly/hedgerestore.

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More horticultural icons:

- **Azaleas at Augusta National, Augusta:** The azaleas at Augusta National Golf Club are one of its most iconic features, with thousands of bushes bursting into vibrant bloom each spring. The course’s famous 13th hole, known as “Azalea,” is framed by these colorful flowers. A new study by indoor golf experts, IndoorGolfGuide, ranked Augusta National as the most Instagrammable golf course in the U.S. bit.ly/augmas13
- **The Big Oak, Thomasville:** The Big Oak is a majestic live oak estimated to be more than 330 years old, with a canopy spanning more than 160 feet. Visitors come to marvel at one of the oldest and largest trees in the South. bit.ly/thombigoak
- **The Tree That Owns Itself, Athens:** The original white oak is believed to have been granted ownership of the land it stood on by its owner in the early 19th century. Although that original tree fell in 1942, a descendant was planted in its place and carries on the legacy of this quirky landmark. bit.ly/ttoi819