



Spotlight on Tommy Gordon

By Bob Banks

Most of the Master Gardeners know Tommy for his love and skill with plant propagation, especially camellias. Some of us know about his illustrious career as a math professor at Georgia State and then Southern Poly for almost forty years. At meetings, we often see his lovely wife of forty seven years, Rachel, whom he met at a small Baptist church in Statesboro, where he was directing music. We hear about his three children and four granddaughters. He continues to be involved with teaching high school math to homeschool students. He sings in his church choir, enjoys listening to a variety of music, and has added square dancing to his activities since retirement. All this while caring for his very large yard filled with azaleas, camellias and other interesting plants. However, few of us have heard of Tommy's early life and his blossoming interest in producing amazing flowers.

Born in Bradley, Georgia and raised in Jones County, northeast of Macon. Tommy is second oldest of eight children and the son of a cotton mill worker. In an area that was known for its pines, peaches and dairy farms, he grew up working hard on their small farm of mostly animals and a large garden. At an early age he began working 10 – 12 hours a day for his daddy's cousin doing general farm work. For this he earned three dollars per day plus a good mid-day meal. In the ninth grade a unique opportunity came when a local plant nursery owner offered him a job at seventy-five cents an hour for eight hour days. Tommy said, "I was making twice as much money in less time. This was definitely a promotion." It was five miles each way to the nursery, and Tommy said he either walked or hitchhiked. Yes, in the 1950's hitchhiking was a common mode of travel in rural middle Georgia.

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Tommy was given a variety of responsibilities at the nursery where many of the azaleas and camellias that were sold were propagated and grown. While he was not actually allowed to do any of the work in preparing the cuttings for the hot house, he did see the process. He enjoyed the acres of gorgeous flowers that the nursery stocked each spring and sold to customers in the Macon area. In the sales yard, Cato's Nursey had between 500 and 1000 camellias that were 3 to 6 feet tall. From October through March, one of Tommy's responsibilities was cleaning the camellia area when the blooms dropped. "Those camellia blooms were impressive!" Tommy says. He continued working with this nursery while having full-time jobs elsewhere until he left for college. After graduation he returned to Macon to teach, and again helped with the big springtime sales.

A little over three years after graduating from high school, Tommy quit his job at Robins Air Force Base to enroll in Georgia Southern College in Statesboro, Georgia. Having never traveled very far from home, he loaded everything he owned in this car, and with a road map he started for Statesboro. Four years later he graduated with a degree in math and started teaching math and physics in the Bibb County Public Schools in Macon. Nine years later he was recruited to teach math at Georgia State University. This gave him the opportunity to work full-time to support his growing family and get a Ph.D. Each step led to the next, and the next step was to accept an administrative job at Southern Polytechnic State University.

In 1986 Tommy, Rachel, and their two daughters (A son was added in 1997.) move to west Cobb County, still rural back in 1986. They were able to buy a house with 2.6 acres. The large number of mature dogwood trees made the Gordons fall in love with this property. A horticulture professor at North Metro Area Technical College says that Tommy is not a gardener, but a collector of plants. Presently, scattered around the house, Tommy has over five hundred azaleas (37 varieties) and at least eighty large camellias (15 varieties he can identify, plus others he cannot). His favorite is the red and white bloom of the

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Camellia Japonica Ville De Nance which has won many awards. Everyone says his yards are a magnificent array of beauty and color. He took the Master Gardener classes held in Carrollton in 2008 with Jerry Colclasure. Tommy is very thankful every day for his ability to see the exquisite beauty in flowers and all of nature. The only remaining item on Tommy's bucket list is to learn to play the piano. Since this is the last item on his bucket list, he has been slow to start taking piano lessons. Surrounded by a loving family, good friends and a beautiful garden, Tommy feels truly blessed with his life.

<p>For more information and details contact Paulding County UGA Extension Master Gardener Extension Volunteers 530 West Memorial Drive Dallas, GA 30132</p>	<p>Email: uge2223@uga.edu Website: www.ugaextension.com/paulding Subscribe to our Home and Garden email newsletter at our website Phone 770-443-7616</p>
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