



Lori Williams

*Well designed borders line the garden pathways.*

# the building of

**J**ust over a hundred years ago, an Alabama businessman asked his doctor a timely question: "What should I do about this epidemic?" And although social distancing as we know it during the Covid era was not broadly observed during the 1917 Spanish flu outbreak, the doctor did recommend seclusion.

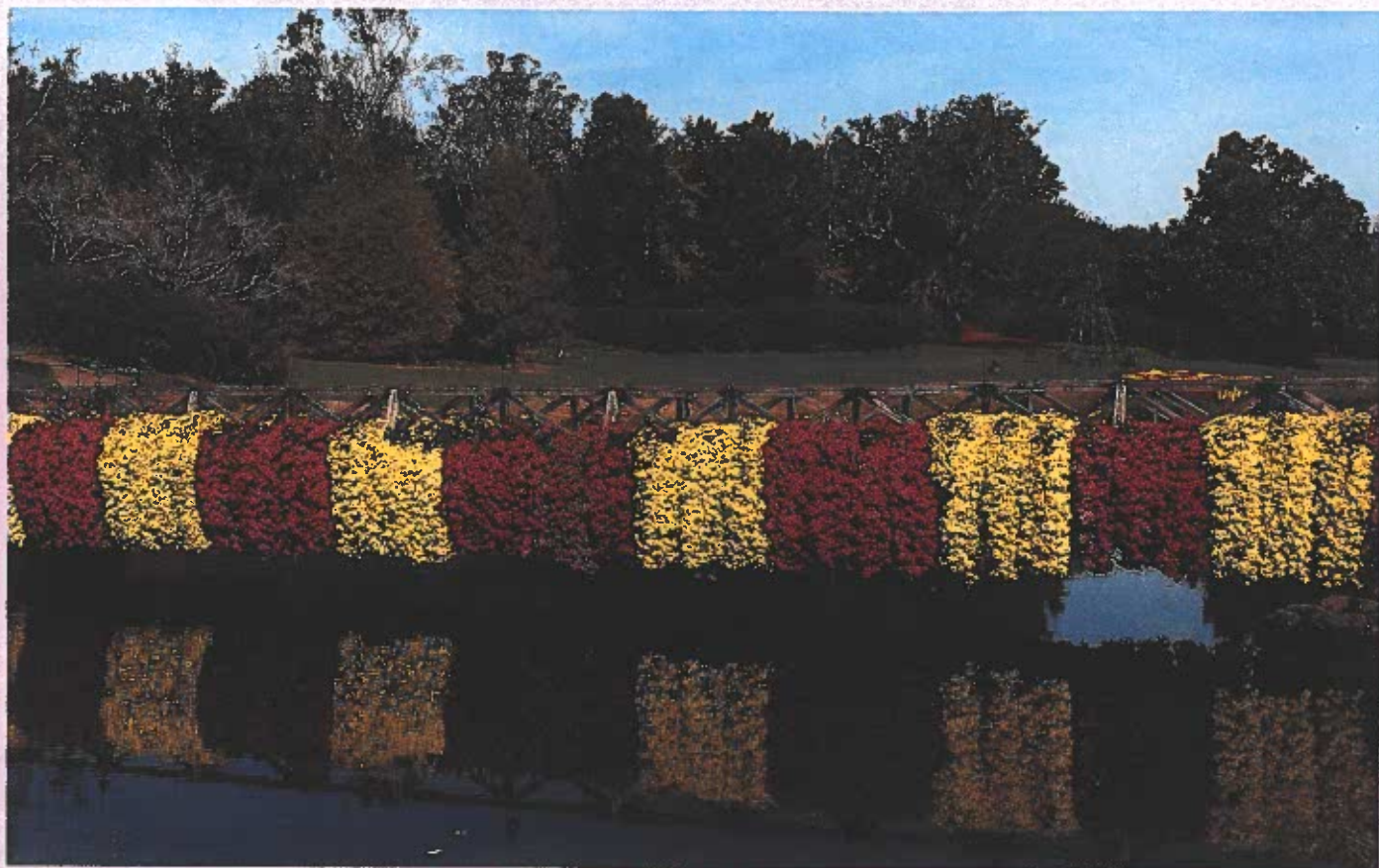
"If you still want to buy that old fishing camp," the doctor said, "do it."

So, Walter Bellingrath and his wife Bessie traded the comfort of their Ann Street home in Mobile, Alabama, for two rustic cabins situated on the Fowl River. From this simple beginning Bellingrath Gardens and later a larger home emerged, both of which now hold recognition on the United States' National Register of Historic Places.

When I visited in June, I saw hints of what I later learned to be true about the Bellingraths. In the Live Oak Plaza portion of the garden I admired the bronze relief of Rebecca at the well filling her pitcher as told in Genesis 24. I wondered, did the Bellingraths know Jesus,

*g a r d e n s   f r o m   e d e n*





Bellingrath Gardens

*Cascading mums reflect in the pond.*

# bellingrath

the Wellspring of life? After seeing everything from allamenda to zinnias and noticing the seamless presentation of the home and gardens, I wondered if the couple studied the handiwork of the Master Gardener.

According to the director of the Bellingrath Museum Home, the unique setting and garden arrangement revealed that the affluent Walter Bellingrath utilized salvaged cast-iron pieces from buildings about to be demolished to adorn the estate. The flower planters in the Rose Garden once served as the columns capitals at the Bank of the State of Alabama in Mobile that was built in 1832. Also saved from destruction were cast-iron railings and columns crafted around 1860 from the Southern Hotel in downtown Mobile.

Although recycling materials may not seem out of place in the twenty-first century, the director explained that it was not popular to build with salvaged materials back in the 1930s. It would be another twenty years before that idea took hold. But eager to create a space fitting

*by lori williams*





*The Bellingrath home holds much of the original furniture.*

with the Alabama landscape colored with azaleas, the Bellingraths opted for handmade brick from the soon to be demolished Vanderbilt mansion in Mobile. They also utilized flagstone from England that had served as ballast on pre-Civil War ships and then as pavers for downtown Mobile sidewalks. When visitors come from England, they tell the director where the different colors of flagstone originated.

Walter Bellingrath's riches originated in bottles of Coca-Cola. In 1903 he purchased the rights to sell the beverage in Mobile. He often walked the tracks within the 100-mile radius of his franchise territory because he lacked money for train fare. Upon returning to his bottling plant, Bellingrath and one assistant used a hand-and-foot powered bottling machine to fill orders. Then it was time to load the wagon, harness the mule, make deliveries, and collect empty bottles that were then washed by hand.

Though Bellingrath eventually prospered financially, he also recognized that "the diligent man will get precious wealth" (Proverbs 12:27, ESV). The fishing camp where his doctor advised him to rest was, in Bellingrath's words, little more than a "semitropical jungle." At first he worked with just one helper (his father-in-law) to clear debris and haul water from the river. Today almost a thousand acres of the property are set aside as undeveloped green spaces. There is even a boardwalk that gives visitors a close-up look at the bayou ecosystem.

The Bellingraths clearly knew the meaning of wholesome living in an Eden-like setting. This earth and all it contains are a gift from God. "The heavens are the Lord's heavens," says the psalmist in 115:16 (ESV), "but the earth He has given to the children of man." The Hebrew for "has given" is *nā-tan*, which appears 187 times in the Old Testament, including God's giving of children (Genesis 48:9), manna (Exodus 16:15), the Promised Land (Numbers 32:7), rest and





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*A plaque shows Rebecca at the well and the biblical influence in the gardens.*

deliverance (Joshua 21:44), and wisdom (I Kings 5:12). When we honor the Creator with the stewardship of these gifts, we are blessed in return.

Live Oak Plaza is my favorite section of the garden. As I bend under the Spanish moss cascading from the oaks, I feel as if I'm parting a veil and stepping into a holy place. This is where Bellingrath Gardens holds its annual Easter Sunrise Service. It is hushed and cool here, with water gurgling into fountains and through runnels from a deep artesian well. The bronze relief of Rebecca at the well, flanked by flower planters and framed by live oak branches, anchors the space.

Although the history of the bronze plaque is unknown, this much is certain: Bessie Bellingrath gathered inspiration from the Old Testament woman who graciously drew water for a thirsty traveler and his camels. Bessie, however, drew from her finances. Upon hearing that particular families were struggling during the Great Depression, Bessie showed up at their doorstep and offered to buy whatever was blooming in the family's yard. She paid hundreds of dollars for the plants.

Some of those plants grace the 400-foot-long border of the Great Lawn. You'll want to sink your bare feet into this luscious verdure or at least reach down to make sure the stretch of emerald carpet is real. I believe this is the kind of setting David envisioned when he wrote, "In pastures of tender grass He causeth me to lie down" (Psalm 23:2, YLT).

Today Bellingrath Gardens covers sixty-five acres of the original land purchased by Walter Bellingrath. For every season there is beautiful color, variety, and texture. As promised in Ecclesiastes 3:11, "God has made everything beautiful for its own time. He has planted eternity in the human heart, but even so, people cannot see the whole scope of God's work





*Water features add a splash of refreshment throughout the estate.*

from beginning to end" (NLT). Poinsettias, ornamental kale, and camellias bloom in the colder months. Spring ushers in azaleas, lilies, tulips, and hydrangeas, followed by roses and magnolias. During Alabama's hot, humid summers, expect to see begonias, jasmine, gardenias, and hibiscus. In the fall the gardens showcase the largest display of cascade mums in the United States. Cultivated from unique plants imported from China, the autumn-hued chrysanthemums drape like bunting over fountains, bridges, and balconies.

Some of the plants are a result of various weather events. In 1979 Hurricane Frederic and its accompanying tornadoes uprooted hundreds of trees and camellias, creating sunny stretches where shade-loving plants once thrived. Plantings were adjusted and garden staff designed new spaces while accepting plant donations from local residents, and the new plants settled in beside old plants with deep roots. The roses had to be excavated, pruned, and refrigerated for future replanting after Hurricane Frederic tore through the garden.

The azaleas came from the Bellingrath's elegant garden in Mobile, and when in abundance many flowers were cut, arranged in vases, and transported to town. At Mrs. Bellingrath's request, the floral arrangements were taken to the local infirmary and given to patients who had no flowers.

Though the flowers whisper grace in the breeze that lifts their heads, the comments on the Guest Registry at the Bellingrath estate speak volumes. Visitors often compare this spot to a Garden of Eden.

What a fitting tribute to a woman who sowed generously, both in her garden and in her life as offered in 2 Corinthians 9:6. "Now I say this: the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows generously will also reap generously (NASB).





*Azaleas in the sunlight dazzle visitors.*

This tribute written by Walter Bellingrath after his wife's death in 1943 tells of the couple's special relationship:

*I shall always think of you wandering through a lovely garden,  
Like that which you fashioned with your own hands,  
Where flowers never fade and no cold wind of sorrow,  
Blights our hopes and plans — And on your face,  
The peace of one whose whole life through,  
Walked with God. ☐*

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*Lori Williams is a gardener and freelance writer from Bethany, Oklahoma. She and her daughter, Aurelia, love to smell magnolia blossoms and grow dill for caterpillars that change into butterflies.*