Lynn R. Lowrey, Plantsman
by Mary Anne Pickens

[Presented at the 17th Annual Meeting of the Southern Garden History Society, Houston, Texas, March 26th-28th, 1999.]

Houston horticulture in recent years has been greatly influenced by a quiet, unassuming man, a Southern gentleman, who truly became a legend in his own time. Lynn Lowrey was a horticulturist by training, a collector by nature. He collected plants and he collected people. A mentor to many, Lowrey left a horticultural legacy to Houston and to Texas. Who was Lynn Lowrey? What did he do? He published no books and only a few articles, yet other authors acknowledged him and dedicated books to him. None of his nurseries were grand successes, yet he influenced other nurserymen in their choice of plants. He collected and promoted many plants, yet only one rare Camptotheca tree that will probably never be seen outside China carries his name. He was the acknowledged leader in the native plant movement in Texas, yet he rarely attended the meetings of the Native Plant Society of Texas. He hated crowds, yet when he died those who attended his memorial service represented many branches of the Agricultural Extension Service, major universities, arboretums, wholesale and retail nurseries, landscape architects, and landscape design companies. Each of those attendees was his friend, each had a connection and a sphere of influence in the world of horticulture and gardening, and each had been touched Lynn Lowrey.

Lowrey was born in Mansfield, Louisiana, on May 30th, 1917. He graduated from Louisiana State University in 1940 with a degree in horticulture. After serving four years in the United States Army during World War II, he came to Houston in the 1950s where he took a job with Texas Nursery, an established Houston firm. In a few years, he opened his own nursery, launching the career that would establish him as an internationally acclaimed horticulturist. Through the years his nurseries always carried unusual plants, which he deemed garden worthy. The sign in front of his first nursery on Westheimer Street in Houston advertised fruit trees and rare and native plants. Lowrey felt that natives were under used and were a source of readily adaptable flora for our gardens. His first

Continued on page 3 . . .
efforts at advertising native plants met with little success, however, and he recalled years later that when he put out a sign advertising wild azaleas that it must have brought in at least one car a week.

Reflecting about people’s reluctance to use native plants, he said:

Maybe people thought that wild plants in Texas couldn’t be very good for “civilized plantings.” I have heard the statement in the past, “Why that grows wild” as if that was an indictment, and it couldn’t be considered for planting.

Lowrey’s bywords were: “This is a great plant. Take it and try it.” Often he would say, “This is a Very Important Plant,” but then all plants were VIP to Lowrey. Anxious to test the limits of plants, he gave them to friends across the state. Friends who lived in San Antonio recalled Lowrey’s fascination with East Texas plants while friends who lived in East Texas recalled his fascination with South Texas plants. Lowrey was simply testing his favorites for adaptability beyond their normal range.

While others may recognize Lowrey as a pioneer in the native plant movement in Texas, he never acknowledged his role. He left it to others to do the organizational things and make the speeches to promote using native plants in the landscape. Lowrey pioneered in a unique way. He simply started using native material in his landscapes and encouraging others to do the same. He felt that formal design was inappropriate for most of our gardens and he encouraged a more natural look to soften the view of our buildings. He liked using native plants and seeing how they would perform in our gardens. Some of his first landscape jobs with their natural look raised some eyebrows. His landscaping was not always popular, but gradually he caused a shift in our collective thinking about our landscapes. Concerned that as the amount of pavement increases our natural environment decreases, Lowrey believed that through our landscaping we could improve our environment. In one of his nursery newsletters, Lowrey said:

Landscape design is usually viewed as the art of arranging lawns, trees and shrubs on a site to make it more attractive. This view is expanding to include the functions that landscape design can perform to improve the environment of a site.

Today a garden style that is widely promoted by the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department is one called Wildscape, which encourages using native plants in natural landscaping to provide cover and food for wildlife, particularly for birds and butterflies. That style was not widespread in the 1950s, but it was a style that Lowrey used.

At one of the first homes he landscaped in Houston’s affluent River Oaks area, Lowrey planted a natural looking thicket of trees and shrubs to shield the house from the busy street. The landscape must have caused quite a stir and a good bit of discussion in the neighborhood. Here was a landscape without neatly clipped hedges, without azaleas, and without the traditional expanse of front lawn. Ruth London, a prominent landscape architect whose portfolio included work at Bayou Bend for Ina Hogg, recommended Lowrey to the homeowner. London described Lowrey as a “nice young man who just knows everything about plants

Continued on page 4...
flowers. He was one of the first to use Central Texas mountain laurels, *Sophora secundiflora*, in Houston, as well as the rare South Texas Anacacho orchid, *Bauhinia lunarioides*. In spite of liking to use native plants, Lowrey never limited himself to just natives. William C. Welch, Professor and Landscape Horticulturist, A & M Extension Service, recalled in the early 1960s when he and Lowrey were in business together, they often used Bradford pears in their landscaping and recalls their plantings of Bradford pears in the esplanade in the Memorial Westchester subdivision during that time. Welch pointed out that Lowrey always wanted to enlare our plant palette and was willing to try any plant. Welch also recalled that people trusted Lowrey and were receptive to his ideas. His quiet, gentlemanly manner won him many friends, including some who were quite influential in Houston. Today, plants all over Houston stand as silent tributes to Lowrey. A large ornamental pear tree on the grounds of St. John's School was a gallon-sized twig when Lowrey helped the neighborhood Bluebird group to plant it one Arbor Day in the 1960s.

Lowrey's travels and collecting in Mexico certainly enlarged our plant palette, and new landscaping around Houston today reflects his influence. The Contemporary Arts Museum has recently planted a row of one of his favorites, the Mexican sycamore, *Platanus mexicana*. Lowrey believed it to be a hardy sycamore, more resistant to anthracnoses than our native species, more drought tolerant, and more attractive with its large, almost velvety leaves. He encouraged the use of this tree and planted several on the grounds of Festival Institute, Round Top, Texas, in the 1970s.

Perhaps the trees that are most identified with Lowrey are the Mexican oaks: *Quercus polymorpha*, *Q. risophylla*, and *Q. canbyi*. All are commonly used in Houston now. In addition to providing variety for us, these oaks seem resistant to oak wilt, which has become quite a problem in many areas of the state. Through the years, Lowrey made numerous trips to Mexico to collect acorns from specimens that he considered outstanding.

Another Lowrey plant commonly used in Houston gardens is a crape myrtle hybrid named ‘Basham’s Party Pink.’ In about 1960, Lowrey obtained specimens of *Lagerstroemia fauriei*, a Japanese crape myrtle with attractive dark reddish brown bark, from the United States National Arboretum. *L. fauriei* is more resistant to powdery mildew than the traditional *Lagerstroemia indica* we have used for so many years. Lowrey began to grow *L. fauriei* and, of course, shared them with his friends. He gave one to Bill Basham, horticulturist for the city of Houston. Basham had specimens of *L. indica* in his garden, and eventually a seedling turned up that was a cross between the two.

Lowrey collected the seedling in 1963, began propagating it, and of course, encouraged others to try it. Greg Grant, of Stephen F. Austin University, believes this was the first *L. fauriei* hybrid introduction made anywhere. In 1967, the National Arboretum began using ‘Basham’s Party Pink’ in their hybridization work. They released their first hybrid, “Natchez” in 1978, fifteen years after Lowrey’s introduction of ‘Basham’s Party Pink.’ In 1982 the National Arboretum released ‘Tuscarora,’ a coral-flowered selection resulting from crossing ‘Basham’s Party Pink’ with *L. indica* ‘Cherokee.’ Today hybrids are quite common with new introductions each year from the National Arboretum, but Lowrey had been the pioneer in the field. ‘Basham’s Party Pink’ is widely available and is marketed by Color Spot in San Antonio.

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Although Lowrey’s primary interest was woody material, there are a number of perennials that are quite common now in our gardens and can be attributed to him. *Ruellia brittoniana* var. ‘Katie’ is a popular little *Ruellia* with many gardeners and its popularity can be traced to Lowrey. Shortly after Lowrey sold his nursery in Conroe, Texas, to his friend Katie Fergerson, two employees, Herbert Durand and Nolan Guillot, discovered a little natural hybrid *Ruellia*. When it was brought to Lowrey’s attention, he began testing it, sharing it, and promoting it. Commonly called ‘Katie’ *Ruellia*, it is now marketed widely and provides color in our long, hot, humid Houston summers. In subsequent work, Greg Grant used ‘Katie’ *Ruellia* as the female parent to cross with a standard pink *Ruellia* to produce the ‘Bonita Dwarf Pink’ *Ruellia*. Grant’s pink selection is sometimes called ‘Dwarf Katie Pink’ *Ruellia*.

The Skullcap, *Scutellaria suffrutescens*, is another
Lynn R. Lowrey, Plantsman... continued from page 6

elevations lower than that, the plants were more suitable for dryer climates.

In 1988, John Fairey, owner of Peckerwood Gardens and Yucca Do Nursery near Hempstead, was one of a number of people who accompanied Lowrey to Mexico. Fairey wrote:

This first expedition with Lynn made a marked change in our lives and would forever alter the future direction of Yucca Do Nursery and Peckerwood Garden. During the next four days, we saw everything from high-altitude cloud forest to desert—an intense introduction to a new way of seeing. Searching for plants began early in the morning and often continued by flashlight, until after ten at night. Lynn is a storehouse of hard earned knowledge from decades of wide-ranging travel throughout Mexico and Texas. He generously shared ideas and information about everything, from obtaining collecting permits on both sides of the border to timesaving tips, and methods of cleaning, storing, and germinating seed. He is a master of making the exhausting work of plant hunting an adventure in learning. This memorable expedition laid the foundation for our desire to further explore Mexican flora.

On one of his collecting trips to Mexico in 1982, Lowrey and his friends Emmett Dodd and Dr. Ray Jordan discovered a small tree that was classified later as a new legume and was named Myrospermum sousanum. A rare, usually multi-trunked small tree, M. sousanum has white pea-like flowers. Dr. Marshall Johnston and Alfonso Delgado, botanists at The University of Texas at Austin, wrote the description of the plant. The plant can be found in arboreta across the state. Lowrey felt that finding Myrospermum sousanum indicated the importance of looking for more plants in Mexico. The legume was named for Dr. Mario Sousa, an authority on the legumes of Mexico.

Lowrey’s collecting skills were responsible for his one brief departure from his own nursery business. In the early 1980s, Joe Bradbury, President of Lone Star Growers (now Color Spot), a large wholesale nursery in San Antonio, offered Lowrey a position to collect and provide them with new plants. Jerry Parsons recalls that Bradbury had been impressed with a large Montezuma Cypress, Taxodium mucronatum in Parson’s back yard, and upon learning that Lowrey had collected and grown it, Bradbury decided to embark on a native plant venture with Lowrey as his native plant specialists. This was the first time a major Texas wholesale grower showed any interest in native plants. According to Parsons, Bradbury had not met Lowrey before he hired him, but was willing to put forth a sizable investment because of Lowrey’s reputation. Parson feels this says “quite a bit about the man [Lowrey] and his legend.”

Mike Anderson recalls that Lone Star offered Lowrey a salary, a credit card, and a pick-up Truck and said, “Go Collect.” What began as a promising partnership proved to be unsatisfactory. Lowrey’s nature did not allow him to fit into the corporate mold. Coworker Agnes Hubbard remembers Lowrey saying he did not like turning out thousands of plants “looking like little soldiers.” He was happier doing his own collecting, sharing with his friends along the way. A few of Lowrey’s introductions are still marketed by Color Spot today, but most are available only through smaller wholesale growers who specialize in native plants.

Although Lowrey taught many people, he did not call himself a teacher. He referred to himself as a student, saying he would be a student all his life. His careful observation and research of his beloved plants certainly made him a student, but by sharing his knowledge with so many others, he became the consummate teacher. His influence on other horticulturists, nurserymen, and landscape architects was phenomenal. Jill Nokes, author of How to Grow Native Plants, called him “a gentle guru.” Another friend, Agnes Hubbard, told of his teaching her to look at plants from the inside out. As they drove around, whether it was in downtown San Antonio or in the mountains of Mexico, he would quiz her about the Latin names of plants they were seeing. If she made an error in identification, he would patiently stop, point out subtleties about the plant—the color of the bark, the angle of the branches, some little something that would distinguish it from something similar. By doing this, she acknowledges, he gave her a foundation in botany that would enrich her life and her career always.

Many other friends consider him their teacher and mentor. Sally and Andy Wasowski dedicated their book Native Texas Gardens to him, as did Mark and Mary Bowen with their book Habitat Gardening for Houston and Southeast Texas. University professors told their students about Lowrey and took them to gardens he had landscaped.

continued on page 8...
Lynn R. Lowrey, Plantsman...
continued from page 8

Through his skill in connecting people, Lowrey played a part in providing the funds for that research. Shortly before he died, he also took the experimental drug Camptothecin as part of his own cancer treatment.

It seems fitting that Lowrey's last work was such an important one. His fascination with plants had ranged from their use in landscaping to their use in medical research. His love of plants knew no boundaries, no constraints. His generosity to others continues. Even those he will never meet will benefit from his love of plants. Lowrey died on June 28th, 1997.

In March 1999, two white oaks, two fringe trees, and a swamp chestnut oak were planted in the new Lynn R. Lowrey Arboretum on the campus of Rice University. Spearheaded by Charles Tapley, architect and landscape architect, and Jerald Mize, an attorney, businessman and plant enthusiast, the Arboretum will feature native Texas trees and shrubs. In addition to serving as a living memorial to Lowrey, the Arboretum will be used as an educational resource for Rice University. Lowrey's legacy lives on.

Awards Received by Lynn R. Lowrey

Southwest Chapter ASLA Honor Award

American Association of Nurseryman National Landscape Award to Lowrey Nursery in recognition of achievement in landscaping and beautification for North Loop Office Park.

The Houston Botanical Society Environmental Achievement Award for personal achievement to Lynn R. Lowrey in recognition of his success in preserving endangered plant species native to Texas in city, and in propagating and establishing such plants in other suitable locations; his relentless pursuit of collecting and introducing native and other rare plants to the Houston area; his generosity in always sharing his knowledge and time with others.

The Houston Chapter of the American Institute of Architects and the Municipal Art Commission presents an award of distinguished achievement to Lynn Lowery for an outstanding contribution to the environment of the city of Houston by Tom Dodd, Jr., Award of Excellence Second Annual presented to Lynn Lowrey for his achievements in understanding, promoting and using native plants of North America.

The Native Plant Society of Texas presents the Nancy Benedict Memorial Award for an act of conservation/service in the field of Native Texas Plants to Lynn Lowrey for his work on the conservation, propagation, distribution of *Pistacia texana* Swingle. Eighth Annual State Conference, Dallas, Texas.

The Garden Club of America gratefully acknowledges the significant contribution to Horticulture by Lynn R. Lowrey for pioneering the use of native plants in the landscape and for generous sharing of his knowledge, time and plants. Garden Club of Houston, Zone IX.

Sierra Club, Lone Star Chapter, Letter of Recognition for contributions to plant conservation in Texas, June 4th, 1996. applauding Lowrey's "many years of collecting, propagating, planting and promoting plants native to Texas and the Southwest...your efforts have gone a long way toward building appreciation for the value of native plants and the habitat that they provide."

The Native Plant Society of Texas presents this Charles Leonard Weddle Memorial Award in recognition of a lifetime of service and devotion to the Texas native plants to Lynn Lowrey. Presented this 19th day of October, 1996, at the annual meeting of the Society, El Paso, Texas.
Chatwood Garden Opens
by Flora Ann Bynum, Winston-Salem, North Carolina

Chatwood Garden in Hillsborough, North Carolina, was opened to visitors in April by its new owners, SGHS members Bruce and Susan Lueck. In the 1950s Helen Blake Watkins began developing extensive gardens around the circa 1808 house on the property, which had originally been used as a tavern and hostelry. Mrs. Watkins' garden became well known throughout the South for its extensive collection of old garden roses, featured in a three-room walled garden. By the time of Mrs. Watkins' death in 1993, the garden had grown to cover several acres and included multiple perennial and woody beds, a large woodland garden, and a stream bed added to provide a water feature.

The Luecks bought the property in 1997 and have worked for two years to renovate and restore the garden beds. There are currently 350 varieties of old garden roses, and thousands of species of other plants, especially featuring those varieties used in Southern gardens. The Luecks have added a one-hundred foot "Long Border" along the rose garden wall. A formal parterre garden of fruits and vegetables is under way.

Chatwood is now open spring through late autumn on Thursday afternoons at 2 p.m. by appointment. Reservations may be made by calling (919) 644-0791 between 9 a.m. and 5 p.m.

Helen Watkins (then Helen Blake) spoke at the first Restoring Southern Gardens and Landscapes conference in 1979 on old garden roses. In May 1982 the conference program included a tour of Chatwood.

Of Interest

Biltmore Portrait Graces New Olmsted Stamp

A new postage stamp set for release in September honors Frederick Law Olmsted (1822-1903), founder of American landscape architecture and creator of Biltmore Estate's landscape plan. Biltmore, the home of George Vanderbilt, was the site of the Southern Garden History Society's 1998 annual meeting. The stamp features Olmsted's portrait, commissioned by Vanderbilt and painted by John Singer Sargent in 1895, which usually hangs in the Second Floor Living Hall of Biltmore House, but was on loan to the National Gallery of Art for its Sargent exhibition. Also in the stamp are a photo of Central Park and two architectural landscape plans, all designed by Olmsted.
We are greatly appreciative of the edifying venues provided by the staff members at Bayou Bend Collection and Gardens, the Menil Collection, and the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston. Special thanks go to Mr. and Mrs. Frank C. Smith, Laura Rice Neff, and Mr. and Mrs. W. McIver Streetman who opened their private gardens to society members, and to Mr. and Mrs. Nathan Avery, who hosted the annual dinner and business meeting, at which Allen Lacy, “Dean of American Garden Writers,” gave the keynote address.

Sunday’s optional field trip took attendees northwest of Houston into the rolling Hill Country of Washington County. The afternoon was spent at Peckerwood Garden, the home and nursery of noted plantsman John Fairey, which is described as “an artist’s garden set in a natural landscape.” It was hard to pry participants away from the garden’s dizzying collection of unusual specimens and the proprietor’s adjacent business, the renowned Yucca Do Nursery. A delightful picnic lunch at Margaret Shanks’ garden antique shop in Brenham was followed by a trip to everyone’s favorite, the Antique Rose Emporium. There, owner Michael Shoup gave a brief overview of the ever-expanding nursery before turning us loose to enjoy the inspiring and often whimsical garden displays and myriad assortment of roses.

Of the outstanding roster of lectures, two will be reprinted in Magnolia. This issue contains the profile of plant explorer and nurseryman Lynn Lowrey, which was presented by Mary Anne Pickens, past president of the Native Plant Society of Texas, and member of the Winedale Historical Center and Advisory Council of the University of Texas at Austin and of the Pioneer Unit of the Herb Society of America. She also has been a frequent Magnolia contributor. Ms. Pickens’ great-grandfather J. F. Leyendecker started Pearfield Nursery in 1876, and her grandparents continued to run the nursery through the 1950s. Her interest in the history of horticulture has evolved through research on her family’s nursery and that of other nineteenth-century Texas nurserymen.

The fall issue of Magnolia will feature “A New Look at our French Gardening Roots: Nouveau Jardinier de la Louisiane,” an essay by Sally Kittredge Reeves, archivist of the New Orleans
The Southern Garden History Society and the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation are jointly sponsoring a project to compile a list of historic plants for the South. At the last board of director’s meeting held in Houston in March, Gordon Chappell, landscape director at Colonial Williamsburg in Virginia, briefed the board on progress with the plant list project.

The plant list will be a compendium of plants mentioned in attributed historic sources. Thus far, Chappell and Larry Griffith, project coordinator, have collected about 15 lists, dating from 1732 until 1935.

Among the lists submitted to date are:
- Thomas Jefferson’s Monticello list, submitted by Peter Hatch;
- Bernard McMahon’s Philadelphia catalogue, William Booth’s Baltimore catalogue, the William Faris Annapolis list, and the Sinclair and Moore nursery list from Baltimore, submitted by Barbara Sarudy;
- the William Byrd plant list, submitted by Colonial Williamsburg as well as Colonial Williamsburg’s own historic plant list;
- the plant lists from Bethabara gardens in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, submitted by Flora Ann Bynum;
- the list compiled from the Brothers of the Spade correspondence between Peter Collinson and John Custis, compiled and submitted by Peter Hatch;
- a colonial vegetable list compiled and submitted by Wesley Greene, garden historian, Colonial Williamsburg;
- John Randolph’s Williamsburg list, compiled and submitted by Terry Yemm, garden historian, Colonial Williamsburg;
- the Middleton Place list;
- the Hardy Croom citations submitted by Goodwood Museum & Garden, Tallahassee, Florida;
- and the Jacob Smith list from Fayetteville, Arkansas, compiled by John Fitzpatrick and submitted by Harriet Jansma.

The composite list will include common and botanical names (if given), the date of each plant’s appearance on each submitted list, the date and provenance of each original list, the submitter of the list, and the plant type, i.e.: perennial, tree, shrub, etc.

Gordon Chappell and members of the landscape department at Colonial Williamsburg are developing a standardized format so that the final product will have universal utility. Chappell encouraged all members of the Southern Garden History Society to participate in the project, emphasizing that the more diverse the lists the greater the use the combined list will have in the future.

In addition, a facsimile of each submitted list will append the document, so that a researcher can not only determine the date of the use of a plant but also determine the other plants that were used in the same garden.

If you have questions about this project please contact Gordon Chappell, (755) 220-7764 and e-mail at elcgc@vt.edu, or Larry Griffith, project team leader, at (757) 565-8713. They will be pleased to discuss the project and lead you through the process of preparing a list.

Membership Dues Notices were mailed May 14th for dues for the year beginning May 1st, 1999 through April 30th, 2000. New members who joined after January 1st were not billed, but will receive their first renewal notice next May. Members who have questions about their dues may call the society’s membership secretary, Paula Chamblee, at (336) 721-7328 in the Old Salem office.