Azaleas, lake highlight Louisiana's Zemurray Gardens

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LOBANGER — The azaleas weren't quite in full bloom when we visited Zemurray Gardens here a couple of weeks ago. The temperamental El Niño was blamed for dumping hard rains on the area, followed by several nights of below-freezing temperatures. "The freezes didn't hurt us," district manager Jeanine Connelley reported in an update Tuesday. "The azaleas are blooming all over now."

Promoted as "Louisiana's best kept secret garden," Zemurray Gardens, located northeast of Hammond, is open to the public from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. daily through April 12.

Old-growth pines tower over the hilly terrain; Mirror Lake is the jewel in the setting of the 150-acre gardens, which contain nearly three miles of walking paths through natural settings.

Planted include more than 250,000 azaleas of five different varieties, 10,000 camelias, iris, daffodils, Canterbury bells, dogwoods, honeysuckles, petunias, old maids, marigolds and tulip trees. An impressive stand of giant bamboo, imported from Avery Island, looms overhead near the entrance to the gardens.

European statues of cast bronze and white chalk appear at prominent points along the winding paths; benches and footbridges are interspersed along the scalloped edges of the lake that reflects the colors of the flowers. A variety of birds can be seen in the gardens; other animals often glimpsed by visitors include deer, beaver, rabbits, squirrels, wild turkeys and snakes.

"I think what sets Zemurray apart from so many other gardens is the sense of peace and serenity you get," said Connelley, who has been with the gardens for 11 years. "This place kind of gets into your soul."

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About 5,000 people visited Zemurray during flower season last year, she said. The influx of people moving north across Lake Pontchartrain into the area has meant an increase of visitors to the gardens. In addition, tours sometimes combine visits to Zemurray with the nearby Global Wildlife Center.

Originally occupied by Choctaw Indians, the gardens were first settled in the latter part of the 18th century by Nathan Joiner and then went through three other owners before Sam “The Banana Man” Zemurray purchased it in 1928.

Ironically, Zemurray, who made his fortune selling ripe bananas imported from South America, was adamantly opposed to planting flowers around the lodge. It was his wife, Sarah, along with horticulturist Howard Schilling, who first started planting azaleas in the woods without his knowledge.

When the plants matured, they showed him what they had done, and he was converted.

After that, the Zemurrays improved the dam and spillway to create Mirror Lake, a 20-acre lake that became the focal point of the gardens, and surrounded it with thousands of azaleas, camellias and dogwoods.

In 1974, the Zemurrays sold their holdings to the estate of their friend, Fred W. Reimers, and today, the gardens are owned and maintained by his heirs. The part of the property that the lodge sits on is not open to the public, but is maintained as a private estate for family members. Also on those grounds are a swimming pool, tennis court and five-hole golf course.

The lodge was used last year as a location for a movie shoot — a remake of “Lolita,” that has not yet been released in this country.

To get to Zemurray Gardens from Baton Rouge, take Interstate 12 east to the Robert exit, then take Highway 445 north; turn left on La. 40; the gardens will be on the right. Admission is $4 for adults and $3 for children and senior citizens.

Picnic tables are available for use on the grounds. The gardens are also available to groups of 25 or more by reservation anytime during the year. For more information, call (504) 878-2284.