

Georgia First Lady Camellias

By Mark Crawford, Valdosta, GA

Naming camellias for people is a very common practice as a way to honor people and as a tribute and memorial for family and friends who have passed away. In 1966 the naming of a camellia for the wife of the Georgia governor began when Betty Foy Sanders was named by Fred H. Smith in Statesboro, GA. Several years passed when in the 1990s a camellia was named for Rosalynn Carter by the horticulturist at the American Camellia Society (ACS). This particular camellia was found to be very difficult to grow and often declined after going through the winter. Mrs. Carter actually choose this camellia but after several years was determined to be unacceptable for cutting propagation due to its high mortality rate. Since it had never been officially registered with ACS it was abandoned. The situation was explained to Mrs. Carter and she was able choose another seedling to bare her name. The seedling had already been successfully grown from cuttings that grow into very attractive plants. It was registered in 2018 by ACS.

Prior to this I was contacted by ladies from the Garden Club of Tifton, GA who were searching for 3 seedling camellias to name. They called me asking if there were any unnamed seedlings by Hulyn Smith, a famous camellia grower in Valdosta, but by that time all had been named. I suggested there was another collection of unnamed seedlings in Ocala, Florida that were worthy of naming. I called the owner, Lillian Gordy, and asked if she would allow the garden club to name 3 of her seedlings and she was very generous and said yes. This all occurred in February of 2015 so I told the ladies we needed to travel to Ocala that week and choose 3 seedlings since the collection was in full bloom. Three garden club ladies picked me up in Valdosta and we drove to Ocala and found 3 suitable camellias. At the time, I did not know that one was going to be named for Sandra Deal the current First Lady of Georgia. The other 2 were named for former Tifton garden club members Ruth Vickers Fullwood and Bessie Tift. A few months later I was invited to a reception for Mrs. Deal in Tifton where she was presented with a photograph of the camellia to be named for her. That winter I grafted camellia 'Sandra Deal' so that a larger plant would be ready for planting the following winter at the Governor's Mansion in Atlanta. In May of 2017 Mrs. Deal held a reception at the Governor's' Mansion to dedicate the new First Lady Camellia garden. At that time, there were only 3 camellias named – Sandra Deal, Rosalynn Carter and Betty Foy Sanders.

After all the guests had left Mrs. Deal expressed her gratitude for all that had been done. She then made a subtle request to me by saying "wouldn't it be nice if all the first ladies that lived in this house had a camellia named for them". I said I would work on it. I selected a group of seedlings from the collection of Clarence and Lillian Gordy that I had been evaluating in my nursery and sent photos to Mrs. Deal. Mrs. Barnes and Mrs. Perdue were able to select their camellia from the photos and Mrs. Deal choose the others so that all the flowers were different. The camellias were registered in 2018 and planted at the Governor's Mansion that winter. In November 2018 a new governor was elected and I contacted Mrs. Kemp's secretary if

she would like a camellia named for her. Of course, she said yes and selected a seedling originating in Cairo, GA from a photograph. Plants of 'Marty A. Kemp' have been grown and added to the collection at the Governor's Mansion and the other locations. This makes a total of 10 Georgia First Lady Camellias now named.

In the winter of 2019 a complete set of First Lady Camellias which now include Mary Perdue, Marie Barnes, Shirley Miller, Mary Beth Busbee, Virginia Maddox, and Elizabeth Harris were planted at the Fullwood Garden Center in Tifton and at the Jimmy Carter National Historic Site in Plains. The first Baptist Church of Gainesville, GA planted a full set in honor of Mrs. Deal where she attended church. Other Plantings include the Georgia State Botanical Garden in Athens, Lockerly Arboretum in Milledgeville, a private garden and Bonaventure Cemetery in Savannah, Old Town and the Wynn House in Columbus, on the campus of the Medical College of Georgia in Augusta, Railroad park in Dublin, the garden center in Marietta and around the courthouse in Quitman. A Collection was planted in the fall of 2024 at the Atlanta History Center in Buckhead. Full collections are available for other gardens upon request from Loch Laurel Nursery in Valdosta.