

Tony and Anita Avent Juniper Level Botanic Garden Plant Delights Nursery

Juniper Level Botanic Garden (jlb.org) is the garden wrapped around the residence of Anita and Tony Avent. Established in 1988, the 28 acres is home to Plant Delights Nursery (www.plantdelights.com), an international mail-order nursery featuring rare, unique, and native perennials.

JLBG is an ex-situ conservation garden with 10+ acres of public displays and featuring 22,000 different plants, making it one of the most diverse collections in the country. While JLBG displays over 1000 different hostas, it is not solely a hosta garden, but a garden a large collection of hosta.

JLBG's many specialty collections include ferns (900+ taxa), trillium (1000+ taxa), asarum (350+ taxa), Solomon's Seal (240+ taxa), and more. JLBG's research staff also maintains an active plant program, featuring perennial breeding, plant taxonomy, propagation research, and plant exploration. The garden contains quite a few still unpublished new plant species.

JLBG features two grotto waterfalls, several rain gardens, alpine and southwest berm gardens, bog gardens, a tropical garden, many woodland gardens, and sun-drenched perennial borders.

Plant Delights Nursery and Juniper Level Botanic Garden are only open to the public four times each year and host special tour groups by appointment. JLBG also offers educational classes and tours in association with Plant Delights Nursery. 10% of all PDN plant sales revenue funds JLBG.

Anita and Tony Avent, Raleigh, NC

**My Visit: Roberta Chopko
Boonton, New Jersey**

The American Hosta Society last visited Plant Delights Nursery and the gardens of Juniper Level Botanic Garden for the Raleigh Convention in 2001. I was privileged to review our visit in 2001 for the *Hosta Journal* and was pleased to be asked to provide the "update" for our visit this year. Much has changed in the intervening years, but the vision of Tony Avent remains the same; to create an outstanding and beautiful trial garden funded and sustained by a commercial nursery operation that specializes in rare, unique and native perennials.

To date, Juniper Level Botanic Garden has been completely supported from a portion of revenues from Plant Delights Nursery, Inc. at the rate of 10% of gross sales. Intermittently citing himself as “nursery owner, international plant explorer, hosta hybridizer, freelance garden writer and lecturer”, Tony paved the way for the fulfillment of this vision in the summer of 1988 with the purchase of a 2.25 acre tobacco field 18 minutes south of Raleigh. His goal was to offer “the best, the newest and the strangest” of garden perennials, both for sale and in display gardens. In the spring of 1989, Juniper Level Botanic Gardens was born. In 1996 he and his wife Michelle purchased five adjoining acres and added eleven more acres a few years later.

Recently, several more of the surrounding acres have been purchased, bringing the current total to 28 acres, with 10 acres devoted to formal gardens. The gardens contain over 22,000 different plant types, including over 1,000 different hosta cultivars, making it one of the most diverse plant collections in the country. The remaining property houses the operations relating to the retail nursery, the greenhouses containing breeding plants and additional retail plant inventory, and several acres of trial beds that provide for the lining out, growing on and evaluating of plants that may, or may not be made commercially available in the future.



Tony personally greeted every arriving Convention bus, giving the attendees a brief introduction to the gardens and the nursery operation. He told us that he is a strong advocate of organic gardening. The soil he uses in the gardens is comprised of 50% compost and 50% native soil (the latter having a ph of 3.2!), and because the property is blessed with underground springs, he provides irrigation in the garden every 32 feet. Sufficient water is key to good root development in every garden, but even more so in the South where the heat and lack of rainfall can take its' toll.

After listening to Tony's brief orientation, we were free to wander the extensive sun or shade gardens on our own, taking note of many exotic plants that most of us had never seen before, or only read about in books. Many went through all of the greenhouses in the sales area despite the heat, selecting plants to purchase that “might” be hardy in their home garden, even though the zones noted in the plant descriptions indicated otherwise. (After all, Tony Avent has always informed us in his catalog that he considers a plant hardy until he has killed it at least three times.)

Although the buses started arriving at Plant Delights after 2pm, and the temperatures remained well into the 90s until the last bus left at 9pm, very few attendees were deterred from meandering through the gardens, from finding something to purchase at the nursery, or from securing a seat and eating the delicious dinner that was provided under a huge tent adjacent to the nursery.

While the bulk of Convention attendees eventually pulled their plant laden carts to the buses that continually shuttled back to the air-conditioned hotel all during the afternoon, at least 30 people interested in hosta hybridizing remained to join Tony at 7:30 pm for a 45 minute guided tour of his hosta breeding area. He explained his hybridizing philosophy, how he keeps meticulous records on all of the crosses that he makes, and reiterated the fact that he will not introduce a plant onto the market until he has observed it **GROWING IN THE GROUND** for several years and is convinced that its characteristics have remained stable. Noted for the bizarre naming of his hostas, Tony Avent's introductions include Hosta 'Abba Dabba Do', 'Bubba', 'Elephant Burgers', 'Elvis Lives', 'Outhouse Delight', 'Sweet Tater Pie', 'Tattoo', 'Unruly Child', 'White Wall Tire', and 'Zebra Stripes' to name but a few.



Tony lost his first wife, Michelle, to cancer in 2011, but remarried in 2013 to a childhood friend, the former Anita White. Tony noted that Anita has already made a huge impact in the nursery's operation, by spearheading many organizational changes, as well as taking over the marketing end of the business. Her design ideas are reflected in the creation of several new open spaces, replacing some of the older, overgrown sections of the garden.

The visit to Plant Delights Nursery successfully kicked off the garden tours scheduled for this Convention. It was 14 years since we enjoyed the **HOSTA ODYSSEY** in Raleigh in 2001, and we were glad to return in 2015 to see how Plant Delights has grown and flourished **BACK TO THE FUTURE**.

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Lunch



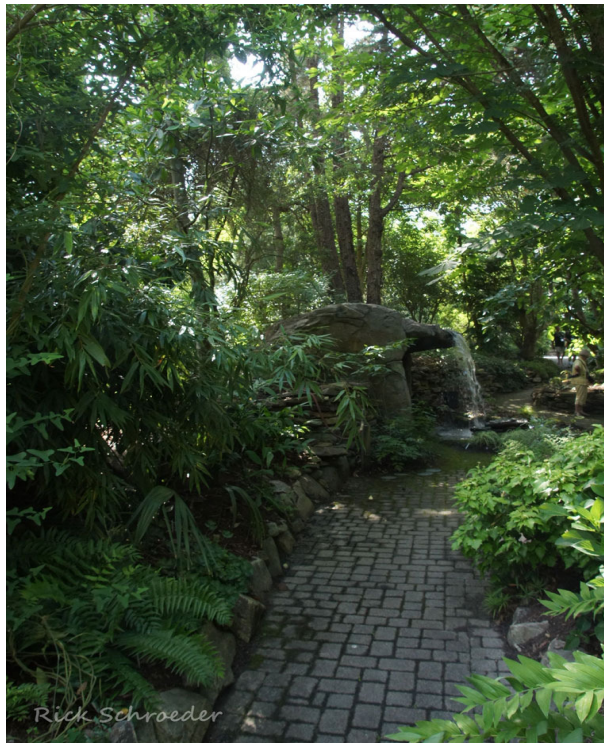
Hosta Growing Area



Potential new Hosta



Shade Walk



Shade Walk and Water Fall