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Extension agent Hayes Jackson never met a plant he didn't like

by Brett Buckner
Special to The Star

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Hayes Jackson has been a longtime volunteer at the Anniston Museum of Natural History. Photo: Trent Penny/The Anniston Star

There are times when Sherry Blanton answers the phone and the caller doesn't offer his name. There's no need. Blanton knows who it is without checking caller ID. She needs only to hear the excitement when he says, "There's an azalea with blooms that are almost black."

The caller is Hayes Jackson, urban regional extension agent with the Alabama Cooperative Extension System in Anniston. Without so much as a goodbye, Blanton is in her car and down the drive, heading toward whichever local nursery holds this new botanical wonder.

This is the kind of childlike joy and wonder that Jackson inspires in those who share his passion — some would say obsession — for plants.

"He finds such delight and wonder in growing things, and everyone around him just gets caught up in that love of nature," said Blanton, who has known Jackson for more than 20 years.

Since 2000, when he became a full-time agent, Jackson's enthusiasm has infected an army of strangers-turned-volunteers all working to beautify Calhoun County. He teaches classes to disadvantaged girls at the Coosa Valley Youth Detention Center. He has long worked on the gardens at the Anniston Museum of Natural History, and is now helping with volunteer efforts at Anniston's new Longleaf Botanical Gardens.

Blanton met Jackson when she started taking master gardener classes through the extension service, some of which he taught. At the time, Blanton didn't have much of a garden herself, just an azalea here and a camellia there. Jackson taught her not only about the nature of plants but their inherent beauty, a beauty anyone — with a bit of knowledge, a lot of hard work and a high threshold for frustration — could attain.

"He'd talk about these plants," Blanton said, "and the more he talked, the more you started to feel like having these plants was as special as owning the Mona Lisa."

Jackson admits to having "horticultural ADD." "When I find something that I like, I can't get enough of it," he said with a self-deprecating laugh. "Whether it's orchids, hostas, bromeliads or whatever, I can't do anything halfway. ... Really, it's a sickness."

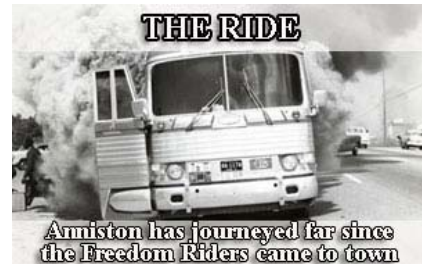
When Jackson recently attended the National Hosta Convention in Minneapolis, Minn., he chose to drive instead of fly, because bringing back live plants on a plane can be tricky.

He wrecked his first rental car, but counted himself lucky. His replacement car was bigger — "so I could bring back even more plants."

Planting for Anniston's Botanical Gardens

"Hayes is without a doubt the most friendly person I've ever met," said Jane Auiler, president of the Calhoun County Master Gardeners, who has worked with Jackson on numerous projects. "His enthusiasm gets everyone excited. There's never a lack of volunteers because people want

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to work with him and be around him.”

For years, Jackson has worked alongside Dan Spaulding, curator of the Anniston Museum of Natural History, and an army of volunteers to create the gardens surrounding the museum.

“He’s done for plants and gardening what the Crocodile Hunter did for alligators,” said Spaulding, who attended graduate school with Jackson at Jacksonville State University. “He’s turning people on to something that a lot of people didn’t pay much attention to. And that’s his magic, trying out something new, something unique and beautiful, and making it work.”

Jackson is also helping with volunteer efforts at the new 65-acre Lingle Botanical Gardens, located at the former Lenlock Community Center. The gardens will eventually include a conservatory for tropical plants, numerous beds and gardens, a café, walking and biking trails and showcases for native plants.

“We talk about it being open to the public in like three years,” said Spaulding, who is heading up the project. “But in a way it already is. We have the gardens, which will include the museum. We’re way ahead of the game and are now planting up near the community center.” (For an update on progress at the gardens, see Page 4D.)

“What’s amazing is, given the economic times we’re in, the fact this thing got started is proof of how much the community wants this,” said Jackson. “It won’t happen overnight. It’s like planting a tree. Whoever plants the seed won’t benefit from its shade, but it will be their gift to the next generation.”

Plants as therapy for disadvantaged girls

Forced to choose a project he’s most proud of, Jackson immediately mentions the girls at the Coosa Valley Youth Detention Center, where he teaches weekly classes in everything from propagation to planting via the Tree Amigos 4-H Club. The horticultural therapy program started in 1994. Grants have since enabled the facility to expand into a four-acre area equipped with greenhouse, storage shed, tree nursery, part-time educator and several adult volunteers.

“It’s such an amazing program,” Jackson said. “To see the look in those kids’ eyes when they discover something new, something they might have never been exposed to ... it’s something you never forget. This is why I’m here.”

Jackson remembers one experience above all others at Coosa Valley. A young girl handed Jackson an elephant ear and asked how to propagate it. Without thought or hesitation, he ripped all the leaves off. When he looked down, the girl was crying, believing he’d killed the plant. After explaining that there was a purpose to his madness — removing the leaves as a way of compensating for the root system — Jackson showed the girl several hydrangeas that he’d done the same thing to.

Having made his point, Hayes went to work with some of the other girls. A few minutes later, out of the corner of his eye, he saw the girl ripping the leaves off a pile of elephant ears and repotting them.

Weeks later, while showing off some his own collection of elephant ears from his own garden, the girl found a variety she didn’t have. Jackson gave the plant to her.

“To foster that kind of appreciation,” he said, “for me, that’s what it’s all about.”

It started with a Chinese wax tree

A single plant set Hayes Jackson’s life on course. Growing up in Anniston, Jackson was a typical boy who loved riding bikes, building forts and wandering in the woods. One day, he stumbled over what he knows now was a Chinese wax tree. Looking it up and down, Jackson thought to himself, “Ya know, I like plants. I like growing stuff.”

Today, his house is surrounded by a seven-acre garden, populated with palms, ginger lilies, bamboo, camellias, azaleas, conifers, hostas, cacti, trilliums, cannas, amaryllis and hollies. (Jackson jokes that there are so many plantings, his entire lawn can be mowed in 13 minutes.)

He still loves walking through the woods, often imagining what the world would look like without all the pesky people ruining the natural wildlife. Though he’s partially deaf, having had both eardrums ruptured — one during a fight with his older sister and the other from a nasty sinus infection — Jackson has remarkable eyesight and can spot an interesting plant going 75 mph down the highway.

For as much as he loves plants, those who know Jackson are quick to talk about his love of animals: his Great Danes (Jackson’s license plate reads “XL Dog”), chickens, a rat terrier and two turtles he’s had for some 20 years.



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The roots of Jackson's love for nature run through Camp Comer, a Boy Scout camp in North Alabama where his father was director and where he spent months of the year sleeping in a tent.

Jackson's mother still hasn't forgiven him for the day when he was 3 years old, playing around the camp and excitedly shouting, "Bug! Bug! Bug!," only what he'd really found was a snake.

After his family moved to Naples, Fla., Jackson began to cultivate a love of tropical plants. He would often bring home strange-looking plants to see if he could make them bloom and grow. If he ate an orange, he'd plant the seeds.

Jackson graduated from Auburn University with a degree in landscape design and ornamental horticulture. After working in southern California with Armstrong Nurseries, he returned to Alabama to work on his masters in environmental biology at JSU.

Using grants from regional nurseries and donations from the Birmingham Botanical Garden, Jackson has traveled to remote parts of the world, finding plants that can be adapted to Alabama conditions. He's walked among the vipers of Thailand and the tigers of India. He's traveled to New Zealand, the Himalayas and China.

"There's something new to discover every day, it's just that most people don't take the time to notice," Jackson said. "Whether it's going to all these foreign countries or just walking in the woods, there's always something amazing just waiting to be found."

Contact Brett Buckner at brettbuckner@gmail.com.

To volunteer

To volunteer to work in the new botanic gardens, call the Anniston Museum of Natural History, 256-237-6766. Volunteer workdays have just been expanding to Mondays and Thursdays.

The gardens could also use donations of top soil (to layer on top of the fill dirt in the swimming pool) and garden tools. "We're low on shovels and things," Spaulding said. "We don't have enough for all the volunteers."

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