

## ***Focus on Relationships: Table Rock Tea Company Tour*** **The South Carolina Gardener**

You probably know that “GardenFORLife” is State Garden Club President Trish Bender’s initiative. What you may not know is that FOR stands for “Focus On Relationships.” At their September 26 *Go Out and Learn* activity, 22 members of the Lake and Hills Garden Club (LHGC) were immersed in a variety of relationships while visiting the Table Rock Tea Company in Pickens, South Carolina.

Jennifer Lorch, co-founder of Table Rock Tea Company, led Garden Club members on a tour of her tea fields, greenhouse, and factory - all situated on 17 acres in the shadow of Table Rock Mountain. Members quickly learned as much about tea as they did about Jennifer herself.

Jennifer and her husband Steve learned the tea business in Kenya while they were running another business called Hydromissions International, which brought water to communities across the globe. As Garden Club members began their tour, they learned that all tea (green, black, oolong, orange) comes from the same plant, *Camellia sinensis*. Processing methods determine the type of tea that is produced. Near a line of deer resistant tea plants that lined Jennifer’s drive, Garden Club members also spied an apiary with honey bees that pollinate the tea plants. With that glance towards the bee yard, Garden Club members had their first peek at the many relationships which nourish Jennifer’s farm.

As the tour continued towards the Lazarus tea field, it became clear that Jennifer was not only a confident, passionate educator but also a remarkable visionary. During the winter of 2017-2018, the harshest winter in 100 years, all but 14 plants in the fledgling company’s first production field were killed. The tea company was devastated and ready to close. And yet like Lazarus, hundreds of tea plants, thought to be dead, came back to life. Jennifer plans to keep acquiring more land, planting more tea fields, and adding a cafe in the next five years. Gardening FOR life, not against it, nurtures life at all levels of our landscapes, as Jennifer’s tea fields demonstrate.

The Focus on Relationships continued as the tour moved into the greenhouse with 25,000 *Camellia sinensis* plants. Flowers from tea plants during the first year of growth become seeds the next year. Jennifer mass germinates 1,000 seeds in a single bin. However, she could not transfer all those fledgling plants into individual pots without volunteer help. These plants spend a full year in the greenhouse and another year in Lazarus field before they are finally ready to be planted. Jennifer’s 95% greenhouse success rate results from tea plants that are essentially self-watering due to long tap roots, as well as from the people who nourish their development.

The tour wrapped up in the factory where the focus was on the oxidation process that results in the type, flavor, and aroma of tea products. Dried and withered tea flushes (two leaves and a bud) are rolled on a table to begin oxidation. The tea next goes into a humidity chamber. Oolong tea is a result of medium oxidation while black tea is fully oxidized. Want green tea? Bake the tea to stop oxidation altogether.

At the Table Rock Tea Company, Lake and Hills Garden Club members truly went out and learned about hand-picked, mountain grown tea. They also learned about the tea farmer, Jennifer Lorch, whose intelligence, patience, spirit, and humor have allowed her to find success in the hand-crafted tea market. But, most of all, the Garden Club members learned about the interconnected relationships - plants, pollinators, and people - that encourage life.



Lake and Hills Garden Club members toured the Table Rock Tea Company in Pickens, South Carolina as part of a Let's Go Out and Learn activity in September.