

**We were invited to speak to this group of scientists, magicians and puzzle enthusiasts honoring world-renowned Scientific American columnist Martin Gardner. We were asked to return in 2010.**

# The New York Times



Attendees at a Gathering for Gardner conference learned how to juggle scarves.

J. Carey Lauder

## Puzzles + Math = Magic

By EDWARD ROTHSTEIN

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ATLANTA — In a room off the Japanese-style entryway of a house here, a small mahogany coffee cup is firmly attached to a polished wooden saucer. A wooden spoon sits on the plate. So do two white sugar cubes, also made of wood. But can the cup be lifted off the saucer? It seems locked in place. There are no obvious joints, no hidden pieces that can be turned.

“The trick,” says Mark Setteducati, a magician based in New York, “is to think of it as a real cup.” That is the approach used by Akio Kamei, a Japanese puzzle-maker, who sculptsures fine woods into shopping bags, envelopes, books and dice. In each, hidden internal carvings and intricate joints hold the object together. But the key is to consider the nature of the object being portrayed — that cup, for example; only then will the puzzle reveal its secrets.



And is the house itself not a source of wonder? It is the home of Tom Rodgers, an Atlanta investor and businessman. Under his

stewardship and partial sponsorship, devotees of mathematics, magic and games come for three days every two years from as far as Japan and England. They meet each other in Mr. Rodgers’s house and in a hotel’s conference halls, sharing their analyses and inventions, paying tribute to the man who inspired them all: the one-time columnist for Scientific American, Martin Gardner.

Mr. Gardner, 89 and living in Oklahoma, attended only the first two Gatherings for Gardner, as these meetings are called, and missed the sixth, from March 26 to March 28, as well. But as a writer who redefined the nature of recreational mathematics, and inspired many hundreds of careers, he remains its guiding spirit.

From the start of his “Mathematical Games” column in 1956 until he retired in 1991, Mr. Gardner must have discussed the work of at least half of the 180 or so people in attendance. Now younger generations are joining in, making this the largest gathering yet.

At the St. Regis Hotel in Atlanta, brief talks are offered about subjects ranging from the technical to the magical: Fibonacci numbers, rope tricks, the history of dice, the prospect of multi-universes. A British businessman, Adrian Fisher, describes the design of the world’s largest hedge maze, made of jasmine bushes, now growing in Yunnan, China ([www.mazemal.com](http://www.mazemal.com)). Two speakers, Kay Caskey and Laurie Young, promote the therapeutic powers of juggling ([www.laughways.com](http://www.laughways.com)) and teach sedentary puzzlers how to toss scarves.