

# An Azaleaphile Salute — Dr. John Lewis Creech

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John Lewis Creech was born in Woonsocket, Rhode Island, on January 17, 1920, to Bessie (Faulkner) and Edward Creech, who were originally from England. He received a BS degree in Horticulture from the University of Rhode Island in 1941, and like many of his generation, World War II had a profound effect on his life. In 1941, as a newly commissioned ROTC graduate, he served with the First Infantry Division in North Africa. While on patrol, he was captured by the Germans and sent to the Oflag 64 Prisoner-of-War camp in Szubin, Poland. The camp was built around an old school, was used exclusively to hold US ground officers, and grew from about 150 American officers in 1943 to 1500 in January 1945. While a prisoner, he put his horticultural training into practice. The Germans allowed him access to a greenhouse and to three cold frames. He was permitted to develop and maintain a 2 1/2-acre plot of land on which he grew tomatoes, beets, lettuce, and other vegetables. Creech thus helped his fellow prisoners avoid starvation by supplementing the meager rations provided by the Germans. In 1945, he was liberated by



This USDA photo of Dr. John L. Creech was probably from the early 1980s and was among the photos of the Directors that hung in the hall at the National Arboretum. Thanks to Barbara Bullock, curator of azaleas, for assistance in obtaining the USDA photo. (All photos by author William C. Miller III unless otherwise noted.)



(L to R) Dr. John L. Creech; Dr. Shigetoshi Takabayashi, director of the Kyoto Botanical Garden; and Dr. Yotaro Tsukamoto, professor emeritus of Kyoto University. Photo taken on April 14, 1989, at the Kyoto Botanical Garden.

After returning home, Creech resumed his studies and attended the University of Massachusetts, where in 1947 he earned an MS degree in Horticulture. That same year, he began his career with the US Department of Agriculture, joining the Office of Plant Exploration with the title of Horticulturist. That is where he met B. Y. Morrison, whom he much admired. Creech remarked that “my first order of business was to get a key to the (Arboretum) grounds and spend all my spare time working the azalea beds and other plantings with B. Y. Morrison, the first Director.” [1]

From 1950 to 1959, Creech was superintendent at the Glenn Dale Plant Introduction Station where, among other accomplishments, he participated in the final years of the Glenn Dale azalea distribution program, oversaw the completion of Morrison's Belgian-Glenn Dale project, pursued his own azalea breeding program, and continued his education, earning a PhD in Botany from the University of Maryland in 1953. In 1955, consistent with his interest in ornamental plants of the Far East (especially camellias, hollies, and azaleas), Creech went on the first of nine international plant exploration expeditions sponsored by the USDA under an agreement with Longwood Gardens. Over his career, plant exploration destinations included Japan, Okinawa, China, Taiwan, Yugoslavia, USSR, and Nepal.



John L. Creech (right) is presented with a Gold Medal and Certificate of Merit by the Honorable Hisashi Taniguchi in the Mayor's office at Kurume City Hall on April 17, 1989. Dr. Creech was the first foreigner to be so honored.

## John Creech, the Plant Explorer

Following in the tradition of David Fairchild, Ernest Henry “Chinese” Wilson, R. Kent Beattie, P. H. Dorsett, and Frank N. Meyer, Creech's record of plant introductions is breath-taking. A summary of material that he collected in his 1961 trip to Japan alone is six typed pages and includes *Ilex pubescens*, *Machilus thunbergii*, *Filipendula*

t h e  
Russians.  
For his  
efforts on  
behalf of  
his fellow  
prisoners,  
he was  
awarded a  
Silver Star  
and a  
B r o n z e  
Star.

*kamtschatica*, *Poncirus trifoliata*, and a number of azaleas and rhododendrons with more familiar names. A more direct measure of Creech's contribution to the azalea community is to note how many times his name appears in Appendix C of Lee's *The Azalea Book*. [2] Appendix C is a compilation of federal azalea introductions (seeds, seedlings, scions, plants, and cuttings) beginning in the early 1900s. Creech's name is well represented on practically every page.

### John Creech, the Scientist

It is beyond the scope of this article to adequately describe the azalea breeding program of John Creech, the research scientist, but certain general patterns reflect the wide-ranging nature of his interests. A survey of working documents from the files at "Bell Station" [3] reveals a number of interesting directions. Early in his career Creech



John L. Creech presenting paper entitled "Kurume Azaleas in Western Gardens" at Symposium, First International Azalea Festival at Kurume, Japan, April 17, 1989.

crossed *Rhododendron atlanticum* with many of the Ghent hybrids at the station. Select Glenn Dale hybrids (e.g., 'Sheila') were crossed with 'Seattle White' and Satsuki hybrids. He explored the evergreen by deciduous question with his *kaempferi* x *japonicum*, *kaempferi* x *luteum*, and *canescens* x *Mucronatum* crosses. In the mid-1950s, Creech returned to his focus on *atlanticum* and the American native azaleas. In the late 1950s, he conducted studies involving *weyrichii*, *reticulatum*, *simsii*, and *tosaense*.

Creech held increasingly responsible positions as Assistant Chief of the New Crops Research Branch from 1959 to 1966 and then Chief from 1966 to 1972. He was an Agricultural Research Service (ARS) National Program Staff Scientist from 1972 to 1973, after which he became the third Director of the National Arboretum, succeeding Dr. Henry Skinner in 1973. As he advanced in his career, Creech found that his duties inescapably took on a more administrative nature, clearly a situation not entirely to his liking. In an October 19, 1959 memorandum to his boss, Dr. Carl O. Erlanson, under the subject "Species Crosses in Rhododendrons," Creech sought to craft a "back door" that would enable him to continue his breeding activities. He wrote, in part:

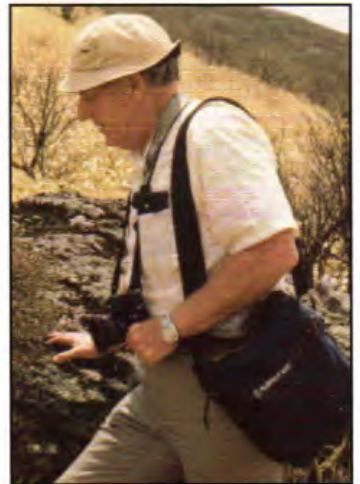
"For several years, I have been making a few crosses between azalea species in the Section *Sciadorhodon* and Section *Tsutsusi* as a means of showing the close relationship between these two groups. For example, we have at Glenn Dale, a few seedlings of the following crosses that I made as follows:

*R. weyrichii* x *R. reticulatum*  
*R. simsii* x *R. weyrichii*  
*R. weyrichii* x (*R. simsii* x *R. weyrichii*)  
*R. tosaense* x *R. weyrichii*

"It is my understanding that even though the duties at the Branch level are administrative, we are encouraged to maintain a research interest. I should like to informally continue the program involving perhaps 2 to 3 crosses a year along the above lines. This would not involve more than my having the pollinations made at Glenn Dale and the progeny raised in an unheated greenhouse. I believe that this will neither interfere with my work nor the operations at Glenn Dale. Should any of these crosses produce material of more than basic research interest, I would turn them over to Dr. Whitehouse for use in his ornamental program."

Erlanson's approval took the form of a brief handwritten comment.... "No objection... COE." [4]

In recognition of his expertise, Creech was asked to draft the US position paper for the 1972 Stockholm Conference on the Human Environment. In addition, Creech was one of the first to recognize and call attention to the problems of genetic erosion and the importance of genetic diversity. When major crops on which we are dependent are allowed to become genetically uniform, they become vulnerable to epidemics as was precisely demonstrated in 1970 when



John L. Creech visiting an ancient *Rhododendron kiusianum* at Handakogen highlands, part of the Aso Mountain range where *kiusianum* can be observed growing in the wild. This was an "old friend" that Dr. Creech had visited many times. Photo taken on April 19, 1989.



'Mrs LBJ', an evergreen azalea named to honor Mrs. Lyndon Baines Johnson on the occasion of her presenting the first B.Y. Morrison Memorial Lecture in 1968. (Photo by Don Hyatt of a specimen at the Polly Hill Arboretum on Martha's Vineyard.)



the US corn crop was severely damaged by a virulent strain of *Bipolaris maydis*, the southern corn leaf blight.

Creech's foreign travel was not limited to plant exploration. In 1974, he went to China as a member of the first National Academy of Sciences Plant Science delegation to visit China since World War II.

### The American Horticultural Society Connection

Ben Morrison was a very important figure in the early development of the American Horticultural Society (AHS), including serving as the editor of the society's journal, *The National Horticultural Magazine*, for 37 years. A very significant and influential figure in the horticultural community, it was only natural that others in Morrison's sphere of influence would become involved in the AHS. Creech was no exception and served as AHS president from 1953 to 1956. He also served on the Editorial Committee for the journal, eventually becoming the committee chairman. The purpose of the committee was to assist Morrison in securing material for publication. In 1954, Creech was the editor for a special AHS publication entitled "Vegetative Propagation," an 86-page "how to" compilation of thirteen articles covering every conceivable aspect of propagation in which Creech wrote the articles on "root cuttings" and "layering."

### John Creech, USNA Director

Creech served as Director of the US National Arboretum from 1973 to 1980. Asked early on if he had any specific plans for the National Arboretum, he responded: "I really can't foresee any basic changes in direction. For years, Dr. Skinner had many dreams about the future of the Arboretum and has developed a master plan incorporating many of them. My ambition is to expand on the base that he has already developed." [1] While not contemplating radical departures, Creech envisioned the development of gardens and promenades for the elderly and the handicapped, features that dis-



'Ben Morrison', an evergreen azalea named to honor Benjamin Yoe Morrison, the first Director of the National Arboretum and a noted horticulturist. The prestigious Morrison Lecture was established in 1968 by the Agricultural Research Service.

played autumn colors as an alternative for those who couldn't escape to the mountains, and an increase in the emphasis on research and education activities.

Recognizing that even small matters are important, an example of one of Creech's first initiatives was to improve the appearance of the Arboretum's annual report that was submitted to the National Arboretum Advisory Council. A secondary function of the annual report was to serve as a vehicle for reporting progress to other arboreta and botanical gardens. Originally a simple mimeographed report, Creech perceived that its current form conveyed a certain image. With the addition of a cover page and plastic binding, the report looked more professional and was comparable to similar reports received from other arboreta, botanical gardens, and other USDA units.

In 1975, Creech took a leadership role in resolving the status of the Friends of the National Arboretum (FONA), which was an entity created by a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between the Arboretum's Advisory Council and the Agricultural Research Service for the purpose of receiving gifts and expending funds on behalf of the Arboretum. The Department's Office of the General Counsel (lawyers) had questioned the adequacy of the MOU. It required Congressional action to modify the National Arboretum Act of March 4, 1927, to resolve the matter. This was more than a minor issue and over the years FONA has played a significant role in support of the Arboretum.

A number of significant changes in structure, program, and responsibility occurred during Creech's tenure as USNA Director. In 1975, the Plant Introduction Station at Glenn Dale became part of the Arboretum; Dr. William L. Ackerman transferred from Glenn Dale to the Arboretum to focus on his *Camellia* research; Dr. Howard E. Waterworth, a virologist by training, became the Glenn Dale "location leader"; and the study of plant viruses was added to Bell Station's responsibilities and quarantine mission.

Creech was instrumental in negotiating a gift from the Nippon Bonsai Association on behalf of the Japanese people in commemoration of the 200th anniversary of the United States (America's Bicentennial in 1976). This led to the development of the Arboretum's National Bonsai Collection. The gift of 53 bonsai and six viewing stones (*suiseki*), in 54 cases and requiring 16 trucks, arrived at quarantine facilities at the Glenn Dale Plant Introduction Station on April 1, 1975, having been accompanied from Japan by John Creech and Sylvester ("Skip") March. The official dedication ceremony was on July 9, 1976. [5]

In 1976, the Arboretum received a \$5,985,000 supplemental appropriation for the acquisition and rehabilitation of the long sought after 32-acre brickyard property that adjoined the Arboretum. It was necessary for Creech to obtain the

approval of the National Capital Planning Commission, which approved the proposal on August 12, 1976.

Finally, the National Herb Garden was completed and dedicated. A cooperative project between the Arboretum and the Herb Society of America, the original concept of a National Herb Garden dated back as far as 1965 and a number of possible locations were considered before the Arboretum was selected. Due to Congressional regulations, it was necessary for the Herb Society to develop an "official" relationship with the Arboretum so that private funds could be used. Construction began on December 15, 1978, and the garden was dedicated on June 12, 1980. [6]

In August of 1980, Dr Creech retired from the Arboretum. Dr. Frank S. Santamour, Jr. served as Acting Director until Dr. Henry Marc Cathey assumed the position on June 14, 1981.

### Publications and Recognition

An AGRICOLA (USDA bibliographic database) literature search reveals 47 Creech citations, the majority of which are published in *The American Nurseryman*. [7] In addition, Creech is the author of five articles in the *Journal American Rhododendron Society* beginning in 1967, and six articles in *The Azalean* beginning in 1985. Some of his other important literary contributions are: an introduction and commentary in "A Brocade Pillow" by Itoh Ihei, (translated into English by Kaname Kato, 1984); a revision of "Garden Shrubs and Their Histories" by Alice M. Coats, 1968 and revised in 1992; and "The Bonsai Saga—How the Bicentennial Collection Came to America," 2001.

The numerous horticultural achievements of John Creech have been recognized by many organizations here and abroad. A partial listing of these awards is shown in Table 1.

### Retirement

When John Creech retired after more than 33 years of Federal service, he went south to Hendersonville, North Carolina, rather than east to Scientists' Cliffs where many USDA retirees seem to traditionally congregate. In 1986, he was appointed part-time Interim Director of the North Carolina Arboretum, a 426-acre public garden affiliated with the University of North Carolina system and located southwest of Asheville near the Blue Ridge Parkway. He actively promoted the North Carolina Arboretum and participated in their fund raising programs.

In the spring of 1989, Creech led a group of nineteen Americans to visit Japan and to attend the 1st International Azalea Festival and Symposium, which coincided with the 100th anniversary of the city of Kurume. He had been involved in the planning for the international festival since 1985, and was one of the speakers at the Symposium. His presentation was entitled "Kurume Azaleas in Western Gardens," and it was

published in *Azaleas in Kurume—Monograph of Kurume Azalea and its Relatives*, the official proceedings of the symposium. [8] The three-day portion of the trip that involved Kurume was filled with numerous receptions, including a visit with the Honorable Hisashi Taniguchi, the Mayor and Chairman of the Executive Committee of the Festival. In the Mayor's office, Creech was presented a medal and certificate for distinguished contributions to Japanese horticulture and Kurume.

John Creech was just the person to help the North Carolina Arboretum develop a bonsai program, which had its genesis in 1992 with the donation of a large number of specimen plants from Mr. and Mrs. George Staples of Butner, North Carolina. Other donations followed, and the North Carolina Arboretum became recognized as a major center of bonsai activity in the southeast. One unique feature is that they have begun to focus on applying bonsai techniques to plants native to the Blue Ridge region. In 1995, as a result of Creech's suggestions, a National Native Azalea Repository was established at the North Carolina Arboretum with the goal of developing a repository with a complete collection of native azalea germplasm.

### John Creech's Legacy

When asked in a 1991 AHS interview to name his "most important" introduction, John Creech responded *Lagerstroemia fauriei* (crape-myrtle) because it illustrated precisely the critically important partnership process between plant explorers and hybridizers of identifying, acquiring, and utilizing wild plants to improve existing domestic plants. [9] Creech had collected seed of *L. fauriei* on a 1956 trip to Yakushima. Some time later when the seed was germinated, it was discovered that about half of the resulting plants exhibited a resistance to powdery mildew, a major problem with existing hybrids in the trade. In the mid-1960s, Dr. Donald Egolf launched a breeding program designed to incorporate the highly desirable resistance characteristic of *fauriei* into a cohort of significantly improved hybrids. The plant that was to become 'Natchez' was officially named and released in 1978. More than 20 improved and powdery mildew resistant crape-myrtle hybrids resulted, and it all began with John Creech's initial collection of seed on a small Japanese island in 1956.

Other noteworthy Creech introductions are: *Pyrus calleryana* 'Bradford' (the Bradford pear), *Betula platyphylla* var. *japonica* 'Whitespire' (Japanese white birch), *Osmanthus heterophyllus* 'Gulftide' (holly olive), *Euonymus fortunei* 'Longwood' (Wintercreeper), *Juniperus conferta* 'Emerald Sea' (Japanese shore juniper), *Aucuba japonica* var. *borealis* (Japanese aucuba), and *Camellia lutchuensis*.

John Creech was responsible for the introduction of two evergreen azaleas: 'Mrs LBJ' and 'Ben Morrison'. While he was not the hybridizer of either plant, neither



would have been available today without his involvement, a matter of Creech being at the right place at the right time. Both plants were introduced by Secretary of Agriculture Orville L. Freeman at the June 26, 1968, meeting of the American Institute of Architects in Portland, Oregon, to honor two distinguished Americans. It was on this occasion that Mrs. Lyndon B. Johnson delivered the first B. Y. Morrison Memorial Lecture.

Not as familiar to the azalea community as the very popular 'Ben Morrison', 'Mrs LBJ' is described in the June 26, 1968, press release as "an evergreen azalea that grows 3 feet tall, with leaves that are medium green and shiny on new growth. Its flowers are described as "hose-in-hose" – a trumpet inside a trumpet, making almost a double flower. The flowers are white, with some frills on the edges, and are 2 to 3 inches across. The flowers grow in clusters of two or three. 'Mrs LBJ' blooms in late May and is hardy to Zone 7, which includes southern New Jersey, Delaware, most of eastern Maryland, northern Virginia, and Tennessee." [10] Subsequent research has shown that it was Clone D in a series of azaleas produced by Albert Close at Glenn Dale, which utilized 'Seattle White' as the seed parent. The recently introduced 'Brookside Delight' is a sister seedling. [11]

'Ben Morrison', which needs little introduction, was described as "grows to 3 feet tall. It has medium green, dull leaves and single flowers up to 3 inches across, 2 or 3 in a cluster. The flowers have rose centers and white borders, with blotches of darker rose. It blooms in middle to late May, and is also hardy in Zone 7." [10,12]

### Conclusion

Thomas Jefferson, one of America's great early horticulturists and third President of the United States amongst his many other accomplishments, appreciated the rela-

tionship between mankind and the environment. By his actions, he supported conservation, agricultural education, and plant exploration and introduction. In a 1797 letter to M. Giraud, Jefferson put into context the importance of the search for new crops when he wrote: "One such service of this kind rendered to a nation is worth more to them than all the victories of the most splendid pages of their history, and becomes a source of exalted pleasure to those who have been instrumental in it." He later elaborated on that concept in an 1800 memorandum, when he wrote: "The greatest service which can be rendered any country is to add a useful plant to its culture." [13] Jefferson was expressing his own feelings of satisfaction for his many contributions to the world of agriculture. With more than five decades of dedicated service to his country, John Creech, patriot, planter explorer, and scientist identifies well with Jefferson's point of view as one of America's distinguished horticulturists.

### Notes and Endnotes

1. Undated Background Statement distributed by the US National Arboretum when Dr. Creech assumed the position of Director in 1973.
2. Lee, Frederic P. 1965. *The Azalea Book*. 2nd Edition, D. Van Nostrand Co., Inc., Princeton, New Jersey, 1965.
3. "Bell Station" was the common name for the Glenn Dale Plant Introduction Station (or Plant Introduction Garden). "Bell" was actually the name of the interurban trolley line station that was adjacent to the property. That is also the explanation for "Bell Number," the working number assigned to crosses and to selections from crosses prior to naming and introduction.
4. October 19, 1959. Memorandum entitled "Species Crosses in Rhododendron" from J. L. Creech to C. O. Erlanson.

## Brookside Gardens Chapter Support

Dr. Charles Evans (left), president of the Brookside Gardens Chapter, presented a check to David A. Vismara, director of Brookside Gardens, at the December 4, 2005, chapter meeting. The chapter's contribution supported the annual Green Matters Symposium Series, held in February 2006 that is sponsored by Brookside Gardens. The program focuses on environmental, ethical, and educational issues. (Photo by William C. Miller III)



5. Annual Report. 1974-75. US National Arboretum, Agricultural Research Service, US Department of Agriculture. p. 7.
6. "Celebrating 25 Years: The National Herb Garden," James Adams, Arbor Friends, Friends of the National Arboretum, Summer 2005. pp. 1-3.
7. The AGRICOLA literature search was performed by Robin Everly, librarian at the US National Arboretum Library in Washington, DC.
8. *Azaleas in Kurume—Monograph of Kurume Azalea and its Relatives*. 1989. Published proceedings of the First International Azalea Festival.
9. A Peter Loewer interview with Dr. Creech entitled "Bringing Back Asia's Best" that was published in the December 1991 issue of *American Horticulturist*, pp. 16-22.
10. USDA Press Release dated June 24, 1968, for release on June 26 announcing the introduction of two new evergreen azaleas....'Mrs LBJ' and 'Ben Morrison'.
11. Miller III, W.C. Spring 2002. "The Evergreen Azalea Cultivar 'Brookside Delight'—One of Life's Little Mysteries." *The Azalean*. 24 (1): 4-5, 17.
12. 'Ben Morrison' should not to be confused with 'B. Y. Morrison', an orangey-red self-colored azalea of unknown origin that was associated with Henry Hohman's Kingsville Nursery.
13. Thomas Jefferson. c. 1800, Writings. Memorandum, "Service to my Country." 703, Library of Congress. For more information see the Thomas Jefferson Agricultural Institute Web site at: [www.jeffersoninstitute.org/initiative/jefferson.shtml](http://www.jeffersoninstitute.org/initiative/jefferson.shtml).

**Acknowledgments:** I would like to recognize Robin Everly, Nancy Luria, Nadine Hiers, and Barbara Bullock of the National Arboretum, and David Ellis of the American Horticultural Society for their assistance in the preparation of this article. Finally, I would like to thank Dr. Charles Evans for his suggestions.

*William C. Miller III is a recipient of the Society's Distinguished Service Award and the Brookside Gardens Chapter's Frederic P. Lee Commendation. He is a past president of the Brookside Gardens Chapter, a former vice president of the Society, a past member of the ASA board of directors, was co-chairman of the ASA's membership committee and chairman of the public information committee, is a long-time ASA member, and is a frequent contributor to The Azalean.*

AWARD	ORGANIZATION	YEAR
Alice B. Doscher Horticultural Award	NY State Federation of Garden Clubs	1962
Thomas Roland Medal	Massachusetts Horticultural Society	1964
Meyer Memorial Medal	American Genetic Association	1969
B. Y. Morrison Memorial Lecture	USDA and American Society for Horticultural Science	1971
Professional Award	American Horticultural Society	1972
Silver Medal	UN Food and Agriculture Organization	1974
Gold Seal	National Council of State Garden Clubs	1975
Recognitions Award	Woman's National Farm and Garden Association	1977
Superior Service Medal	USDA	1977
Gold Medal	A. H. Scott Foundation	1979
Medal of Honor	Garden Clubs of America	1980
Hutchinson Medal	Chicago Horticultural Society	1987
Norman J. Coleman Award	American Nursery & Landscape Association	1987
Gold Medal and Certificate of Merit	Kurume City	1989
Liberty Hyde Bailey Award	American Horticultural Society	1989
The Gold Veitch Memorial Medal	Royal Horticultural Society	1992
Award of Merit	American Association of Botanical Gardens and Arboreta	2000
Presidential Award	University of Rhode Island	2002

Table 1. Awards, Awarding Organizations, and the Year the Recognition was Received.