

The Search for the Real George Lindley Taber and the Orchid Azalea

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I have always admired the evergreen azalea, 'George Lindley Taber'. A large-flowering Southern Indian hybrid, it grows well here in Maryland but occasionally loses some of its buds to late spring freezes. One measure of its popularity is that it is a frequent entry in the Brookside Gardens Chapter flower show. Blooming late April to early May, there are usually enough entries to warrant the creation of its own subclass.

For such a popular cultivar, however, precious little is known about its provenance. My theory, supported by the available literature, holds that it is a sport of 'Omunasaki' and is somehow associated with Dr. H. Harold Hume. [1] Alternatively, it has been suggested by others that it is a derivative of 'Formosum'. The final point that I would make in this introduction is that the cultivar name is often misspelled far more frequently than could be attributed to chance. 'George Lindley Taber', the azalea, is named for George Lindley Taber, Sr. That's T-A-B-E-R!

Some plant lovers find that the human contacts and stories encountered in the search for superior plants provide as much interest and pleasure as do the plants themselves. The search for the real George Lindley Taber offers such a

In the early 1880s, Florida was a backward agricultural state with poor transportation services to and from the Midwest and North. It is worth noting for historical perspective that Florida became a state in 1845; the third and final Seminole War concluded in 1858; and the state was better known for malaria and yellow fever than for orange juice, sunny winter vacations, and spring break.

In the absence of today's federal interstate highway system, one suspects that the Jacksonville/St. Augustine area may well have been the end of the line for civilization. Coupled with the fact that Henry Ford did not sell his first Model A until 1903, (the year that Orville and Wilbur Wright achieved the wonder of controlled, powered flight at Kitty Hawk—all twelve seconds and 120 feet) getting from here to there was no simple task. It took the development of railroad service by the Florida railroad barons (Chapley, Plant, and Flagler) to promote tourism, to foster the influx of new people like Taber, and to facilitate the development of new agricultural and livestock interests throughout the state.

An agricultural commodity is neither profitable nor feasible if it has difficulty getting to market. It should be noted that not everyone was in favor of the railroads, and the shipping interests did what they could to frustrate railroad progress.[3,4]

story: a man forced to change his career for reasons of health and who pioneered an important segment of the nursery industry in Florida of the 1880s, overcoming catastrophes and adapting to changing demand over half a century. Taber's accomplishments are memorialized in a living plant of extraordinary beauty, and (to borrow a phrase) here's the rest of the story!

George Lindley Taber, Sr. was born in Vassalboro, Maine, on October 18, 1854, to George and Esther Bartlett (Pope) Taber. It was the same year that Commodore Perry and nine U.S. warships opened up Japan, and the Light Brigade made its ill-fated charge during the battle of Balaclava in the Crimean War. Franklin Pierce was in the White House, the total U.S. population was well past the 23 million mark of the 1850 Census, and the American Civil War was just over the horizon.

Taber was educated at Oak Grove Seminary in Vassalboro, and the Moses Brown Friends School in Providence, Rhode Island.[2] He got a job with the Chicago Board of Trade, the financial venue where a market is made in "forward contracts" or "futures" for commodities. At the age of 27, his successful career was cut short when his health failed, and he was given an ultimatum by his doctor to seek a milder climate if he wanted to live. He must have listened to his doctor; because, in 1881 he left Chicago and headed south.

A Modest New Beginning in Florida

When Taber arrived in the Jacksonville/Fernandina/St. Augustine area of Florida, he talked to the locals, surveyed the existing farms, and settled on a twenty-acre tract of abandoned cotton fields near the St. Mary's River, thirty miles west of Jacksonville.[5] In 1882, he entered into a short-lived partnership with Thomas P. Beath and established the Glen Saint Mary Nurseries. The late George Lindley Taber, Jr. (1906-1998) described the beginning this way: "When Dad first took up residence on his newly bought land here at Glen Saint Mary, he had sort of a working partnership with a man by the name of Beeth [sic]. They put up a log cabin to live in and before long discovered that they could exist by utilizing the meat and milk of a few cows somehow acquired, together with rather extensive crops of sweet potatoes from their garden. Thus it came to be that the two struggling 'Furriners' were soon known and referred to by nearby farmers as 'Beef and Tater'." [6]

Taber (Sr.) described his newly acquired land as "slightly rolling, enough so to provide good drainage, but not hilly enough to cause the land to wash. The soil is a sandy loam underlaid, at about two feet, with a stratum of

clay, fifteen to twenty feet in depth. This is an ideal soil for nursery purposes. In it seeds and cuttings grow rapidly and produce a root system unsurpassed by any character of land in existence.” [7] With land available for 50 cents per acre, Taber acquired more property to facilitate expansion. [8,9,10] The dollar back in 1881 would be worth \$19.71, today so that was still quite a bargain. [11] Where can you buy land (dry land) today for \$10 per acre?

In 1883, Taber returned north to marry Gertrude St. John of Kent, Connecticut. She is described by a local Baker County, Florida, historian as “a person of taste and culture, as evidenced by her possessions and genealogy.” The record indicates that Mrs. Taber died on July 22, 1903, at the age of 60, was taken home to Kent and buried in the St. Andrews Cemetery. According to the aforementioned local historian, she is viewed as something of a romantic mystery by the Taber family. [12] Two years later, in November of 1905, Taber wed Mildred (“Maude”) Willey in Boston. Discontinuing her medical studies, she returned with her new husband to Glen Saint Mary and “Linwood,” the Taber home. With the arrival of “Miss Millie,” Linwood soon became the center of Baker County society. On December 27, 1906, she gave birth to George Lindley Taber, Jr.

Taber was a charter member of the Florida State Horticultural Society and served in increasingly responsible positions beginning with secretary (1888-1891), vice president (1892-1896), and finally president (1897-1904). He was awarded Honorary Membership in 1914. Taber was also active with the American Pomological Society (fruit trees). Through these professional associations, he became a principal factor in the development of the citrus industry throughout the southeast, which is how he met H. Harold Hume, whom he later convinced to join him in his nursery business. In 1906, H.H. Hume joined the nursery staff as secretary and manager.

In 1907, Taber incorporated the nursery, which by that time had grown to 800 acres, under the name Glen Saint Mary Nurseries Company. He had developed an infrastructure and attracted a talented staff. Branch offices were later established at Winter Haven in the south and at Chipley in the west, and a version of the catalog was published in Spanish, which reflected the significant international market.

Taber’s success in part was due to his philosophy. He stressed that a quality product was paramount and that pleasing customers with both stock and service was the surest way to gain new customers and to keep them. The mailing list was many thousands of names long; sales in all parts of the South had steadily grown and included a significant foreign component: Cuba, Mexico, Central and South America, China, India, Iran, and Spain. Many State Experiment Stations and the U.S. Department of Agriculture were repeat customers. For many years, the nursery had annual federal contracts for growing, testing, and distributing citrus hybrids. Taber served as president and treasurer of the corporation from 1907 to 1920. In 1920, he stepped down,



Photo obtained from Mag. Taber (Mrs. George Lindley Taber III), Glen Saint Mary Nurseries Company

▲ George Lindley Taber, Sr., circa 1883

and H. H. Hume assumed the position of president. With the acquisition of the Buckeye Nursery in 1924, the nursery’s leadership position as the largest producer of citrus nursery stock was further solidified. In the acquisition, the rights to the very popular ‘Temple’ orange were acquired. In 1927, Taber resumed active management of the corporation as president until his death on May 10, 1929, at the age of 75.

Trials and Tribulations of a North Florida Nurseryman

The first Glen Saint Mary Nursery catalog was issued in 1883. The nursery prospered and grew rapidly despite a number of catastrophic events of near biblical proportions that befell the region: the freezes of 1894 and 1895, and two plagues — yellow fever in 1888 and the citrus canker in 1913. Then, of course, the story would be incomplete without mention of the hurricanes and tropical storms for which Florida is well known.

The freezes were devastating, and the damage was reminiscent of the great freeze in 1835. A temperature of 26 degrees F for three hours is sufficient to make an orange unmarketable, and this was in the days before processing into frozen orange juice concentrate was an option. On December 29, 1894, temperatures fell to 14 degrees F in Jacksonville. On February 7, 1895, again Jacksonville experienced a drop to 14 degrees F. While the fresh fruit crop was destroyed in December, most of the trees that survived were killed in February. Many farmers and nurserymen were ruined and gave up, banks went under, the citrus industry in northern and central Florida was significantly set back, and Florida in general became a very different place overnight. [13]

From Jacksonville newspaper accounts, the 1888 yellow fever epidemic which began on July 28th and concluded on November 25th was not a pretty picture. During the four month period, 5,000 people contracted yellow fever, and more than 400 people died. The epidemic ended precipitously when the temperature fell to 32 degrees, thus killing the mosquitoes that carried the disease. It would be another 12 years before Major Walter Reed, a U.S. Army physician, would confirm that yellow fever was transmitted by mosquitoes. [14]

Citrus canker, which is still a serious problem today, is caused by *Xanthomonas axonopodis*, a rod-shaped, gram negative bacterium with polar flagella. There is no cure. It causes lesions on the leaves, stems, and fruit; defoliation; reduced vigor; and dieback. Originally misidentified as a form of citrus scab in the fall of 1912, subsequent laboratory investigations of specimens collected in the spring of 1913 from near Miami determined this disease to be something new. Posing no threat to humans or other animals, it was found to be highly contagious to most citrus crops and could be spread easily by insects, birds, human contact, air currents, overhead irrigation, rainy weather, and the transport of infected materials. The first steps to deal with the problem were to prohibit importation of infected citrus stock into Florida and to quarantine the affected areas to limit the transmission to other areas. Upon further study, it was concluded that the usual strategies (e.g., fungicides, phytosanitary practices) would not be sufficient and that eradication was the appropriate response for the short and long term.

▼ 'George Lindley Taber', a Southern Indian hybrid and a sport derived from 'Omurasaki', from the author's garden. Described in Fred Galle's *Azaleas* as a white flushed light to strong purplish pink, blotch darker; mid-season; medium height.



Photo William C. Miller III

In those days, an eradication program meant close inspections of all citrus groves and nurseries by trained crews wearing white coveralls followed by a tanker truck designed to deliver a flaming mixture of kerosene and crude oil under pressure. Picture something on the order of a very large military flamethrower. There is no indication that Taber's nursery was ever put to the torch despite its proximity to Monticello, one of the original citrus canker sites in northern Florida. [15, 16, 17, 18]

While the nursery always welcomed visitors, they were not careless—as demonstrated when Frank N. Meyer, the famous plant explorer, visited on November 25, 1915. He was given a tour of the nursery by Hume but not permitted to approach the citrus groves since he had just come from Alvin, Texas, and Avery Island, Louisiana, which were two citrus canker problem areas. [19]

As sure as California has earthquakes and Kansas has tornadoes, Florida is known for tropical storms and hurricanes, and the water spouts or tornadoes that may accompany them. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) "direct hit" data for the period 1851 to 2004 show that the northeast Florida region experienced 13 category 1 hurricanes, eight category 2 hurricanes, and one category 3 hurricane. [20]

A 125-Year-Old Nursery

How many 100-year-old nurseries can one name? The Glen Saint Mary Nurseries Company is 125 years old. That means that they have been doing what they do for a long time, and apparently doing it very well. The nursery's success is attributable to the business philosophy of their founder which has been faithfully carried forward. But there is more. In a 2004 interview, Lin Taber (George Lindley Taber III) attributed their success to being sensitive to trends in the industry and "learning to change direction every 20 to 30 years." [21]

A visit to the Henry G. Gilbert Nursery and Seed Trade Catalog Collection at the National Agricultural Library in Beltsville, Maryland, afforded the author an opportunity to review many old Glen Saint Mary Nursery catalogs to gauge the growth and development of the nursery over time. The oldest catalog examined was from 1895. A tree and plant nursery, offerings included peaches, plums, prunes, apples, pears, *khaki* (Japanese persimmons), apricots, figs, quinces, pomegranates, mulberries, loquats, olives, grapes, pecans, chestnuts, almonds, walnuts, many kinds of oranges, pomelos, lemons, and *kinkan* (kumquat), and a lengthy list of ornamentals, which included an extensive selection of roses but no azaleas. It is likely that the citrus canker situation was influential in hastening the transition of the nursery from a major citrus stock producer to one with a greater emphasis on producing ornamentals—a diversification which was well underway by 1930. In addition to the 2,400 acres at Glen Saint Mary, branch nurseries (1,000 acres) and offices were established at Winter Haven and Dundee, Florida, and (500 acres) at Chipley, Florida; and display and sales facilities



AZALEA . GEORGE LINDLEY TABER

This glorious Azalea, a Glen Saint Mary introduction and named for our founder, is the loveliest of all the variegated sorts. The plant is well shaped and a strong grower. It stands the cold unusually well and is equally happy in either sun or shade. Often called the "Orchid Azalea," the fragrant flowers are among the largest of the Indicas, and are particularly beautiful when combined with the darker lavenders.

▲ Image of 'George Lindley Taber' and related caption taken from the inside front cover of the 1946 Glen Saint Mary Nurseries Company catalog.

were established at Riverside Gardens in Jacksonville, Florida. The reality has not always been expansion. Mindful of the trends in the early 1960s, the pressure of competition, and the high transportation cost of balled and burlapped and larger container-grown material, many larger items were simply discontinued, as a practical matter, in favor of bare-root items that could be shipped more economically.

Azaleas did not appear in the nursery catalog until 1917 when they offered *Azalea lutea* (now known as *Rhododendron calendulaceum*), *A. nudiflora* (now *R. periclymenoides*), and *A. indica* (different color forms of unnamed Indian azaleas). In 1920, *A. austrina* (now *R. austrinum*) replaced *nudiflora*. Azaleas were not a major item (on the order of citrus or roses) until much later. The catalog in 1928 listed "Kurume Azaleas" in many delicate colors in shades of pink, salmon, red, and lavender but with no suggestion of cultivar names. By 1939, the offering of azaleas was organized by color

and cultivar name and included nearly 50 Southern Indian hybrids and 23 Kurume hybrids.

Today fewer than a dozen azaleas appear in the nursery's Availability list [22]—functionally a simple, one page price list (front and back), which has replaced the 60 to 70 page color catalog that went into considerable detail about each product that was offered. "Management" recognized that change was neither good nor bad, but necessary. Gone is the original focus on citrus, fruit trees, and pecans in favor of rarer and more profitable ornamentals. Timely specialization on crops that are not readily available elsewhere has served the nursery well.

A Record of Accomplishments

Any list of accomplishments would have to include the establishment of a highly successful business which continues today. Taber was a leading citizen and a major employer in the local community. He was recognized and respected by the agricultural community and played an active role in the American Pomological Society and the Florida State Horticultural Society. He collaborated with professionals like H. H. Hume and the research scientists at the University of Florida in the development of cold hardy varieties so that the Florida citrus industry would be less vulnerable to freezes. His pioneering research was recognized in H. H. Hume's 1904 definitive work entitled "Citrus Fruits and Their Culture." In fact, the book was dedicated to Taber. [23]

The Glen Saint Mary Nursery is famous for its introductions and for having brought other varieties to prominence including peaches ('Gibbons', 'October', 'Imperial', 'Jewel', 'Powers', 'September', 'Taber', and 'Triana'), plums ('Excelsior' and 'Terrell'), oranges ('Lue Gim Gong' and 'Owari Satsuma'), grapefruit ('Duncan'), persimmons ('Gailey'), kumquats, calamondin, and limequats. Finally, there is the matter of the azalea cultivar that bears his name, a posthumous honor.

The Orchid Azalea

The primary motivation for this article was the personal belief that every azalea has an interesting person or an interesting but untold story behind it. So it is with 'George Lindley Taber', often referred to as the Orchid Azalea. Fortunately, the story of the azalea was recorded by Gene Barber in a *Baker County Press* column published on April 8, 1976. [12,24]

According to Barber, Ernest Harris, a production assistant at the nursery, noticed a single branch sport in a vast sea of 'Omurasaki' azaleas. He reported the finding to John Otis Barton, his immediate supervisor (and father-in-law). Barton, in turn, reported the curiosity to Hume who directed that they prune away the normal tissue and set the plant aside. Recognizing the value of what they had, Hume instructed Barton to put it, now identified as number 21, into propagation.

Several years passed, and in 1929 it was time to do something with the new azalea. The consensus decision

was made to include it in the nursery catalog and to name it 'George Lindley Taber' in honor of the boss who had passed away earlier in the year. For many years, a beautiful rendition of 'George Lindley Taber' could be found in a place of honor on the inside front cover of the nursery catalog.

At least two "sports" are common on 'George Lindley Taber', a purple self which should probably be viewed as a reversion to 'Omurasaki', and a white self, 'Mrs. G. G. Gerbing', which was selected in 1935 by Gus Gerbing, named for his wife, and introduced in 1947. Gustav George Gerbing and his wife, Azilda, operated the Gerbing Camellia Nursery in Fernandina, northeast of Jacksonville, Florida. He was better known for his work with camellias. [25]

Conclusion

'George Lindley Taber' is a beautiful azalea. The search for the real George Lindley Taber was worthwhile, and the author hopes that, as he did, the reader will come away with a greater appreciation for the nursery industry.

Notes and References

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- [2] The Tabers were Quakers. George's name, his parents' names, and an older sister, Elma M. Taber's name appear in the Cook County, Illinois, Quaker Monthly Meeting Minutes. These Quaker Church Records are available online at www.iltrails.org/cook/quaker_records_z.htm. Thanks to Katy Dill, part of a younger Taber generation, it was learned that George, in fact, had four older sisters and one younger brother.
- [3] M.C. Bob Leonard, "Florida of the Railroad Barons," *The Floridians Text Home Page*, www.floridahistory.org/floridians/railroad.htm (12 February 2007).
- [4] John W. Cowart, "Jacksonville's Railroad History," *John Cowart's Web Page: History, Philosophy, Meditations & Nonsense*, www.cowart.info/Florida%20History/trains/railroad.his.htm (27 January 2007)
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- [6] Statement appended to a George Lindley Taber (Sr.) biography obtained from the University of Florida.
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- [9] Official Town Web Site, "Town of Glen St. Mary," Florida's Outstanding Rural Community of the Year-2004, www.glenstmary.govoffice.com (26 October 2006).
- [10] In a January 14, 2007, M. C. Finotti newspaper article entitled "A Serene Slice of Old Florida" published in the Florida Times-Union, Lin Taber (George Lindley Taber III) put the size of the present day nursery at 900 acres.
- [11] Samuel H. Williamson, "Five Ways to Compute the Relative Value of a U.S. Dollar Amount," 1790-2005, www.measuringworth.com (15 February 2007).
- [12] The late William Eugene Barber, a native of McClenny, was among other things an artist, an art teacher, an historian, and a grower of orchids. He published several columns "From Out Of Our Past" and "The Way it Was" in the *Baker County Press* from the mid 1960s to the mid 1980s. He had a strong interest in all aspects of Baker County life with a particular emphasis on the early years of the region and family histories. The Taber family is well represented in his columns, and his work constitutes a major source of information.
- [13] Larry Wiggins, "The Birth of the City of Miami," www.historical-museum.org/history/found1.htm (25 February 2007).
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- [15] Jean C. Taylor, "The Citrus Canker," Historical Museum of Southern Florida, www.historical-museum.org/history/update/u051a.htm (25 February 2007).
- [16] H. L. Chamberlain, P. D. Roberts, L. W. Timmer, K. Chung, and M. Zekri,, ACROP ALERT: "Citrus Canker Fact Sheet for Homeowners," Plant Pathology Department, Florida Cooperative Extension Service, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, University of Florida, <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/PP116> (5 March 2007).
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- [18] E. W. Berger, H. E. Stevens, and Frank Stirling, "Citrus Canker: II," Bulletin 124, Florida Agricultural Experiment Station, University of Florida, March 1914.
- [19] Frank N. Meyer letter of November 29, 1915, to Dr. David G. Fairchild, his supervisor at the Office of Foreign Plant Introduction, during one of Meyer's periods of domestic travels.
- [20] National Weather Service, National Hurricane Center, Tropical Prediction Center, "Table 10. Hurricane direct hits on the mainland U.S. coastline and for individual states 1851-2004 by Saffir/Simpson category." www.nhc.noaa.gov/gifs/table10.gif (25 February 2007).
- [21] Kevin Neal, "Glen Saint Mary Nurseries Co.," Nurseries Across America '04 Tour, Nursery Management and Production, Branch-Smith Publishing, March 2004, p34.

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- [25] Gerbing Camellia Nursery catalog, Fernandina, Florida, 1946, examined at the Henry G. Gilbert Nursery and Seed Trade Catalog Collection at the National Agricultural Library in Beltsville, Maryland.

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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, past co-chairman of the ASA's membership committee, past chairman of the public information committee, a long-time ASA member, and a frequent contributor to The Azalean.

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Dallas Arboretum Introduces Collection of Encore® Azaleas

Garden-lovers can now view the entire Encore® Azalea collection at the Dallas Arboretum.

The Dallas Arboretum is known as one of the top five display gardens in the United States, and two decades ago, when the garden was created, its first plant residents were azaleas. The first major planting consisted of 2,500 traditional azaleas as part of the Margaret Elisabeth Jonsson Color Garden. This collection also included the first public planting of the Huang collection of azaleas outside of China, and a planting of the National Arboretum introductions.

The results were breathtaking and drew notice; more than 385,000 visitors see the gardens each year, and azaleas and tulips are the big spring stars.

Not everything was rosy, though. Last year, Turner Worthy, director of Horticulture Operations, inventoried the entire azalea collection and found the azaleas were showing signs of age and wear.

"Our alkaline soils, heavy black clay, and severe heat make us a premiere testing site for plant toughness," Worthy says. "I believe azaleas outside of their perfect environment have a life expectancy, and ours have passed it!"

To remedy the problem and to ensure the future glory of the azalea collection, the Dallas Arboretum Horticulture Department committed to a five-year improvement program.

In the fall of 2006, Worthy wrote and received a \$20,000 grant from the Stanley Smith Horticulture Trust to "jump start" the rejuvenation project. This money was in addition to the \$32,000 set aside by the Dallas Arboretum. These funds were used to purchase soil amendments and new plants, and to refurbish the irrigation system. As part of the remedy, the Arboretum began replacing fading azaleas with Encore® Azaleas.

"We have tested the Encore® Azaleas, and I love them!" Worthy says. "They have proven to be heat and cold tolerant, exceptional (multi-season) bloomers, and less likely to have nutritional problems. I would like to have the Encore® (Azaleas), the newest and best azalea, as the backbone of our upgraded display."

For more information about the Dallas Arboretum contact:

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