

A Letter to Corinne Murrah about the Glenn Dale Hybrids—Part II

William C. Miller III—Bethesda, Maryland

In the Winter 2005 issue of *The Azalean*, I presented a February 11, 1953, letter that Ben Morrison wrote to Mrs. Corinne Murrah of Germantown, Tennessee. Mrs. Murrah was one of Morrison's correspondents, and many of his letters to her have survived. They are valuable for the insight that they provide about Morrison and his plants.

In the February 1953 letter, he pointed out that the Glenn Dale hybrids could be characterized into "family groups" in order to make sense out of the fact that there were 454 cultivars. Fortunately, Morrison typed many of his letters although this was before the time of word processors and proportional fonts — and judging from the variable type quality his typewriter was neither electric nor self-correcting. While his typing was not always perfect — it was better than his handwriting.

The Morrison letter that I am sharing here is dated April 9, 1954. To help put the letter in perspective, it helps to know that Morrison retired from federal service on November 30, 1951, but served as a consultant for one year. His official record shows a change of address on March 17, 1952 from Washington to Pass Christian, Mississippi. My interpretation is that this reflects when he left the Washington area.

He had been planning his retirement since the late 1940's and in moments of anger or frustration had threatened to retire at least once before. In the later years, he had an understanding with his boss that he would liberally utilize leave-without-pay status and he exercised it, so his retirement and relocation was not an abrupt change. This letter then was written from the "Back Acres," Ivan Anderson's home just

outside Pass Christian, roughly a month before the Morrison Garden at the U.S. National Arboretum was dedicated.

The letter begins with a comment about the weather. Evidently, it gets quite hot on the Gulf coast, 59 miles east of New Orleans and 60 miles west of Mobile. Margaret Dowdle, (daughter of Frank Dowdle, the Glenn Dale colleague who helped Morrison make a go of the Pass Christian Nurseries, a commercial effort) commented that visitors were encouraged to ring the large bell as there was no way, as a practical matter, to predict how fully dressed folks might be while working in the azaleas in the heat of the day. Margaret spent her teen years in Pass Christian and took piano lessons from Morrison.

▼ This is the initial view of the Back Acres as one turned off Montebello Avenue onto the property. The house (center) and detached garage (right) were the primary structures on the property. That is the author's car.



▲ The azaleas were planted in long rows or "vistas." This is the view looking north, back in the direction of the house. The notation on the slide indicates that the original image was taken on March 29th. The year is not indicated.

▼ Morrison working in the azaleas. The partial shade provided by the pecan trees is evident.



Route 1 Box 142,
Pass Christian, Miss.,
9 April 1954

Dear Mrs. Murrah,

Nearly an inch of rain fell last night so I can relax a little this morning and get a few letters written.

I am delighted that you felt your trip was not only pleasant but rewarding. It would have been dreadful to have taken all that time, for little. The only disappointment from my point of view, and selfish, was that you left before we could take all of you to dinner, at Paradise Point, which I like better than Angelo's, though it is much further off. I hope you will permit us next time to take you all to dinner there.

Of course many more flowers have come out including seedlings, some of which are much to my liking, especially a series of doubles of the Kenwood type, but in light clear colors, from deep red to pale salmon pink, and a few in the lilac to lavender group, with a small group much like Kenwood, i.e. with old rose base more or less flushed with lavender on the top. I have one lovely small seedling, that I feel will replace Bravura, which is a medium size white with a pale rose margin. The seedling is larger, and clearer rose, on the margin.

Of course my weels now are made hideous with the spray program. On account of the sandy soil, and the heat, I have to water heavily the night before I am to spray, otherwise the spray ruins any wilted flowers and the flowers do wilt from heat in this climate.

Your specific question re Pixie. Any variety that has Vittata Fortunei in its ancestry and have striped flowers, may give sports. The common type is a self colored flower the color of the strip or slightly deeper. The more uncommon type, but it has appeared on Pixie here, is the type you describe, i.e. a pink flushed flower, with or without stripes, but with an irregular white border. I fear Mr. Wilson had it and forgetting, took cuttings from those branches, which of course perpetuate the sport. This is a problem for all nurserymen, but sometimes the sports are far better than the parent. Teresa, is such a sport and much nicer than the variety from which it came, I do not find my note re the parent.

Telen Fox and Surprise were the two seedlings, that gave flowers of this type from the beginning, which only means that whatever internal upset there was, came at birth!

I do hope that your own plants will all do well and that there will be decent weather so that they can show what they can do for you. And all success to the Brooks Place plantings.

I see no reason in the world why you should not enjoy praise for beautiful things. I am certain from what I was told that your country place is grand. And I feel confident that your daughter's voice is all that you say. I shall hope to hear it for myself someday. Then I can add my own small quota of praise.

As for myself, I love to sing, as you know. I have been very fortunate in my years of study and the opportunity of learning a wide repertoire. Of course, I am old enough now, so that it does not matter too much, whether

I sing in public or not, and aside from the little church, I do not and do not mean to. In a few years I suppose I shall have to stop, for there are times when it takes more effort to keep my practice schedule than I care to admit. Of course, I am pleased that you found it good. It was much more wonderful when I was twenty years younger and the voice was fresher, but then of course I could not bring to the interpretations the full measure of emotion that one does or can learn from living.

No, the church people know only that they "like it". A few who come from New Orleans tell me that it is better than what they get there but they are not judges, so perhaps they are wrong.

Mr. Anderson enjoyed your visit and looks forward to seeing you all again, as do I, and Douglas too!

As far as I know, I certainly would be free to come in the autumn, but I still do not quite know how I would frame a new lecture. I hate repeaters! Let me brood on it, please.

Sincerely,

Ben Morrison

Referred to as a plantation, the Back Acres was a small 32-acre farm owned by Ivan Anderson. Initially planted with pecan trees, the azaleas were planted out in long vistas or rows. The property had a very modest house and a detached garage big enough for one vehicle which is just as well since Morrison never learned to drive. Despite the modest quarters, Morrison and Anderson delighted in receiving visitors as his comments in the letter suggest.

His letters often contained comments about azaleas. Note especially the paragraph where he discusses 'Pixie', and the tendency of 'Vittata Fortunei' (now 'Vittatum') derivatives to sport. Morrison believed that the flower with irregular white margins (e.g., 'Ben Morrison') was a sport of something else, citing 'Helen Fox' and 'Surprise' which he noted "gave flowers of this type from the beginning." For an understanding of Morrison's model to explain sporting see "Pattern of Sporting," *The Azalean*, Vol. 7, No. 1, pp 1-2. The reference to Mr. Wilson is to Clarke B. Wilson, a nurseryman in nearby Gulfport, Mississippi.

There are many references to music in Morrison's letters. At one time, he considered a career in music. We are indeed fortunate that he chose horticulture and landscape architecture instead. By all accounts, he had a solo-grade voice and derived considerable satisfaction from performing at services at the small Presbyterian church just north on Menge Avenue. It was in the church's sanctuary that he kept his beautiful grand piano. I mentioned the Back Acres house was modest, and perhaps a better description would be "small" or "very small." The speculation is that the home was not big enough to house the piano.



Photo William C. Miller III

▲ Pineville Presbyterian Church is located on the corner of Menge Avenue and Dale Lane, a short distance north of the Montebello Avenue turnoff to Back Acres. It was established October 9, 1877, and provided Morrison a convenient outlet for his musical interests.

▼ Morrison's piano in the sanctuary of Pineville Presbyterian Church.



Photo William C. Miller III

Douglas or Doug, I later discovered was a dog — specifically a dachshund. One has to understand the breed to appreciate Morrison's comment regarding the dog enjoying visitors. Excellent sentinels, dachshunds are bright, slightly willful, but quite engaging. I speak from experience.

Even in retirement, Morrison was in great demand as a speaker, and as the final paragraph suggests, Mrs. Murrah, who was a major figure in the Garden Club of America in the Memphis area, was endeavoring to line him up for a speaking engagement — apparently, from the context, a return engagement.

Notes:

1. The Morrison/Murrah letters were obtained in 1992 from Mrs. Corinne M. Wilson, one of Mrs. Murrah's daughters in Memphis, Tennessee.
2. Three of the images are part of a series of slides obtained from the late George Harding. One of the slides has the name J. R. Dunlop and the year 1956 printed on it. Presumably Dunlop was the photographer. The other images in this article were taken by the author in 1991.

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**.



Photo George Harding

▲ Frank Dowdle returned to Washington in 1961 after the Pass Christian Nurseries ceased operation. He estimated that he left Morrison with "thirty some thousand plants in beds." Morrison's figure can be seen in the background. This view gives an indication of the size of the operation.

▼ The modest house that Morrison shared with Ivan N. (Andy) Anderson and a dachshund named Doug faced nearly due east.



Photo William C. Miller III

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