

A Garden Grows in Pineville:

Establishing the Morrison Back Acres Collection

Sylvia McLaurin—Pass Christian, Mississippi

Highway 90 skirts the wide sand beach along the Mississippi Gulf Coast from Biloxi to Pass Christian, passing by stately homes, some originally built before the Civil War now restored or totally reconstructed after Hurricane Katrina. Centuries-old live oaks stand, gnarled and twisted by wind and sand, some destined for death, others defiantly producing “water sprouts” and “witches’ brooms,” the flush of new growth in clumps along their heavy limbs. Here and there remain large *Indica azaleas* that, with camellias and sasanquas, are synonymous with the Deep South, so much so that they are almost taken for granted.

Much of the landscaping now is less old-home-place and more off-the-design-board. Yet in spring unnamed narcissus may again push their way through the soil, in summer an old rose bush offers its fragrant blooms, and returning *lycoris* line a few flower borders late in the season. Discounting the heat and humidity of the summer months and problems with inadequate drainage, the Gulf Coast is blessed with a climate nearly ideal for growing plants—plentiful rainfall, moderate temperatures, and usually fertile, though sandy, soil. Moreover, it has a long history of garden enthusiasts who for generations have contributed pass-along plants and advice to each successive generation.

Benjamin Yoe Morrison, well-known developer of the Glenn Dale azaleas and former head of the U.S. National Arboretum, retired to Pass Christian, Mississippi, in March, 1952. He began development of another line of azaleas which he named Back Acres after his Pass Christian home on Montebella Road. Approximately 90 crosses were selected, 53 of which are named and registered, the remaining carrying hybridizing numbers. Mrs. Sarah Groves in a 1969 *JARS* article describes his hybridization program, quoting Morrison’s 1964 correspondence with Mrs. William Murrah: “I now have a huge collection...that are not only splendid, but quite unique....This little paragraph tells precisely my aims—doubles that will be cold-hardy and kinds with white or nearly white centers and colored margins.” [1]

Benjamin Morrison had another interest in the Pass Christian area. In the Pineville community, he was a member and pianist for the Pineville Presbyterian Church. In fact, he donated his baby grand piano to the church; it is still in the sanctuary, kept tuned, and played every Sunday for services. In an article published in *The Azalean*, William C. Miller quotes Morrison: “I love to sing....It [my singing] was much more wonderful when I was twenty years younger....the church people know only that they like it.” [2]

During Hurricane Katrina the Pineville church sustained damage to the roof and fellowship hall. However, the sanc-



▲ Pineville Presbyterian Church

▼ Ben Morrison playing his grand piano in the sanctuary of the church.



tuary remained intact and served as a dormitory for some of the thousands of volunteers who came to help repair the coast. Morrison’s piano was unscathed.

Following the storm, the elders and members of the church had first to clear the downed trees around the church. In the aftermath of Katrina’s devastation, it was decided to beautify the grounds to provide an appropriate setting for the 130-year-old church. Wayne and Sylvia McLaurin, church members and members of the ASA’s Louisiana Chapter, suggested that the church design and plant a Back Acres azalea garden in tribute to the accomplishments of Benjamin Morrison and to provide a repository of Back Acres cultivars that would be as complete as possible. In fall of 2007, the church Session agreed and set aside about one and one half acres for the garden and general landscaping.



Photo W. McLaurin

▲ Margie Jenkins growing the Back Acres cuttings collected by ASA members.



Photo W. McLaurin

▲ Church member Sylvia McLaurin watering the newly planted Back Acres.

▼ Church members building three azalea beds in the fall of 2009.

▼ A future azalea bed

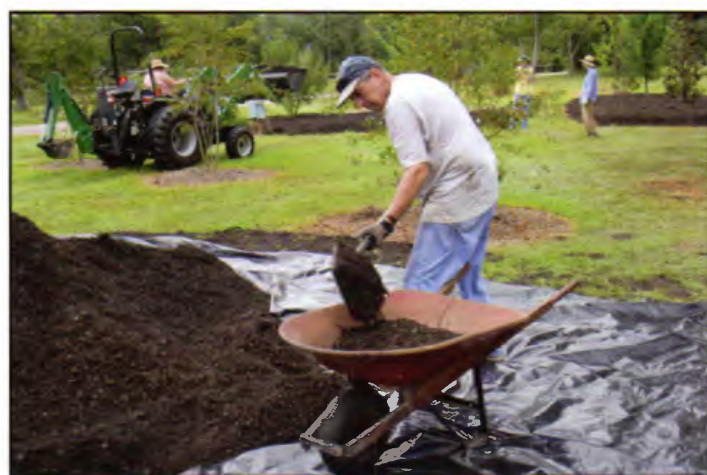


Photo W. McLaurin



Photo W. McLaurin

The first step was design. Though the church building was near the corner of Menge Avenue and Dale Street, its property extended for several acres to the rear of the church through what had once been a pecan grove. Using ideas from church members who gardened and expertise from professionals in engineering, horticulture, and landscape design, the general landscaping plan for the grounds and garden was drawn up and approved.

At this point **Bob McWhorter**, past president of the Ben Morrison Chapter of the ASA, offered his help. In correspondence with the **McLaurins**, he developed a spreadsheet on the Back Acres cultivars and began methodically soliciting cuttings from ASA membership. In July of 2008 he packaged and sent cuttings for 60 cultivars to the **McLaurins**, who planted them right away in misted seedling beds in an open greenhouse under **Dr. McLaurin's** supervision. However, in late fall, repeated high winds, as well as power failures, delayed the insulating and disrupted the heating of the greenhouse. As a result, almost all of the cuttings perished. However, **McWhorter** once again took out the spreadsheet and contacted ASA members, who generously consented to take cuttings for the garden. In July, 2009, **McWhorter** sent cuttings to **Margie Jenkins** in Louisiana, who had agreed

graciously, at the **McLaurin's** request, to grow out the cuttings at her nursery. These cuttings should be ready for planting in late 2010 or early 2011.

Azaleas benefit from some shade, but the proposed garden area behind the church was exposed to the hot summer sun. The next step, then, was to plant trees. In the spring of 2009 a private nursery donated more than thirty 15 to 30 gallon shade trees, including magnolias, red maples, and crape myrtles, which were planted by church members on the eastern and western edges of the planned beds. Church members also laid irrigation pipes through the beds, connected them to the church well, and tied the low emission sprinkler system to a timer to help ensure consistent irrigation to the trees. In the next year they will be repositioned to water the beds themselves.

In the fall of 2009 the church purchased topsoil and members formed three of the eventual seven azalea beds. In them were planted two plants each of 27 Back Acres cultivars derived from cuttings from Auburn University's Camp Hill azalea collection. With these were also planted companion plants, such as *Hydrangea paniculata* 'Limelight' and *Ilex verticillata*, from Margie Jenkins' nursery to serve as interest plants when the Back Acres are not in bloom.

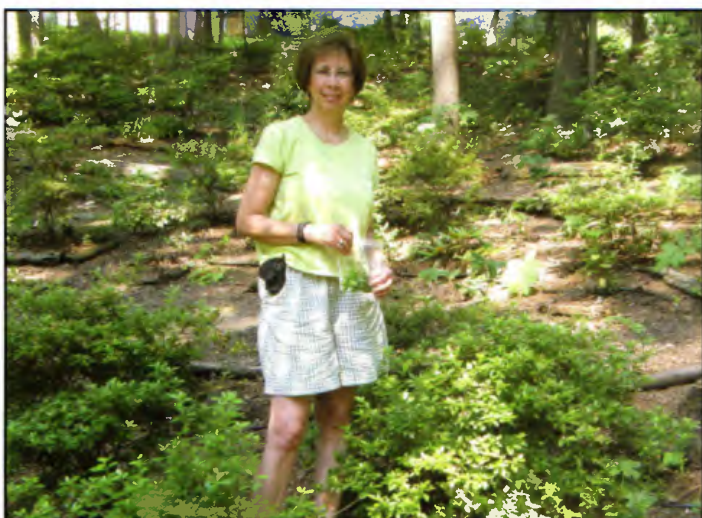


▲ Charles and Wanda Hanners donated cuttings to the Back Acres garden.



▲ Ted Munter, on left, presented Bob McWhorter with cuttings for the Back Acres garden.

▼ Rosa McWhorter donated cuttings to the Back Acres garden.



▼ Wanda Hanners, on right, provided cuttings to Bob McWhorter.

Future plans for the garden target fall-winter of 2010 for planting additional Back Acres cultivars. Also in the tentative plans are walkways, seating, a low fence defining the garden area, and signage identifying the garden and the individual plants. Moreover, the search will continue for any missing cultivars and efforts will be made to propagate and plant them in the garden.

Adjacent to the Bay of St. Louis and facing the Gulf of Mexico from which has come its ambience and its nemeses in the form of two recent devastating hurricanes, Pass Christian is an extraordinary place, known for its scenery, its charm, its food, its characters, and, most of all, the talented and notable people who have lived and are living there. None have been more remarkable than Benjamin Morrison. It is good to know that thanks to the ASA and the Pineville Presbyterian Church, his legacy will live through a small garden in Pass Christian, where he spent his last years doing the research he loved.

A special word of gratitude is extended to ASA members who have contributed time, effort, advice, and cuttings to the project, especially the following (in alphabetical order): **Dr. Joe Coleman, Charles and Wanda Hanners, Margie Jen-**

kins, Margie Ann Jenkins, Phil and Frances Louer, Bob and Rosa McWhorter, and Ted Munter.

Information about the following named cultivars would be greatly appreciated: 'Armstrong's White', 'B. Y. Morrison', 'Crescendo', 'Fire Magic', 'Helen Hill', 'Lost Chord', 'Maude Jacobs', 'Moresca', and 'Nils Hansen'. Please contact sylvia.mclaurin@mgccc.edu or wjm97@msstate.edu.

References

- [1] Groves, S. (1969, July 15). *Oxford Rare Plant Garden. Quarterly Bulletin of the ARS*. Retrieved Jan 12, 2009, from <http://scholar.lib.vt.edu/ejournals/JARS/v23n3-groves.htm>
- [2] Miller, W. (2008, spring), *A Letter to Corinne Murrah about the Glenn Dale Hybrids—Part II. The Azalean*, 30, 17-20.

Sylvia McLaurin is retired faculty from the University of Georgia. She and her husband Wayne are members of the Louisiana Chapter of ASA and work on numerous public gardening projects on the Mississippi Gulf Coast.