

Today, My Favorite Satsuki Hybrid is ‘Shinnyo-no-tsuki’

By William C. Miller III — Bethesda, Maryland

This is the fourth in a series of “favorite” articles. ‘Ambrosia’ and ‘Opal’ were identified as my favorite Glenn Dale and Linwood Hardy Hybrids; and cardinal flower (or *Lobelia cardinalis*) was identified as my favorite perennial companion plant. It was really difficult selecting one favorite Glenn Dale Hybrid when I had 454 candidates to choose from. Fortunately, my task of selecting a favorite from any group is limited to plants with which I have first-hand experience. While there are many thousands of Satsuki¹ (species and hybrids), I have comparatively few in my azalea collection.

‘Shinnyo-no-tsuki’ is what the Japanese call a *soko-jiro*... a white throat with a solid, colorful border; and it’s sometimes what we refer to as a “picotee.” (See Figure 1.) For me, the draw is the flower. Lacking fragrance, the 2.5-3.0 inch, single flower has overlapping lobes, is vivid, purplish-red with a whitish center (not a pure white), and blooms mid- to late-May in my Mid-Atlantic garden. Self-colored flowers, the color of the border, are mentioned in the literature; but I don’t believe I’ve ever seen them on my plant. The flower color is tough to photograph. I attribute that to environmental factors. Images taken early in the day (e.g., 8:00 AM) exhibited what I would call an electric glow (perhaps that’s what they meant by “vivid”) which I didn’t find in images taken in mid-day. In my experience, ‘Shinnyo-no-tsuki’ is a slow grower. My 30+ year old plant is roughly one meter tall and one meter wide... perhaps owing to the fact that it gets full afternoon sun, is exposed to the deer, and doesn’t enjoy regular fertilization. By the way, I know it’s the deer browsing because the bunnies can’t reach that high.

My introduction to ‘Shinnyo-no-tsuki’ actually began many years ago when I learned that it was one of the many azaleas that Ben Morrison used in the development of the Glenn Dale Hybrids. Morrison acquired it from the Chugai Nursery Co. (*Chugai Shokubutsu Yen*), Seed Merchants and Nurserymen, in 1939. Of course, the Chugai Nursery with locations in Yamamoto, Kawabegun, and near Kobe, was pretty popular because it published its catalog in English. The first USDA acquisition was recorded in Plant Inventory No. 138 on page 4 as PI131312 in a group of plants described as “Reported to be hybrids of *R. simsii* and *R. indicum*” (See Figure 2). There were subsequent introductions by Dr. John Creech in June, July, and September of 1955, which were recorded as PI226148,



Fig. 1. ‘Shinnyo-no-tsuki’ is a slow growing, vivid purplish-red Satsuki Hybrid that blooms mid to late May in the author’s garden. The unique color of the border is a remarkable quality. The image has not been “photoshopped” or enhanced in any way. ‘Shinnyo-no-tsuki’ was registered in the early Shōwa Era probably in the late 1920s or the 1930s. Photo by William C. Miller III.

PI227102, and PI228116. In 1958 and 1959, ‘Shinnyo-no-tsuki’ was distributed from Glenn Dale with 23 other Satsuki Hybrids to a select group of “cooperators” as a part of the Glenn Dale evaluation process. Ben Morrison, who had retired to the Back Acres in Pass Christian, Mississippi, in 1952, was one of the cooperators. In May of 1962, Dr. Joseph J. Higgins from the Glenn Dale Plant Introduction Station requested feedback on the cooperators’ experience with the plants that they received. The cooperators were provided with a form that listed the cultivars and had a number of columns to which they could apply a check-mark. They were asked to indicate whether or not the azaleas successfully overwintered (yes or no), and whether they were desirable for the trade (yes or no). Finally, they were given a column and a tiny space to make “comments.” Most cooperators favorably checked the appropriate columns and sent the list back. Rather than fill out the form, Ben Morrison wrote a one and one-half page letter. A frequent recipient of distributions out of Glenn Dale, Morrison’s response is fascinating and will be the substance of a future article.

The Orderly Process of Discovery

As is my practice and in preparation for this article, I surveyed the limited number of reference books (i.e., *A Brocade Pillow*, Lee, Galle, Kennedy, Callahan, the *IRRC* etc.) in my personal library to see just how big a

131295 to 131321. RHODODENDRON.		Ericaceae.
From Japan. Plants purchased from the Chugai Nursery Co., Yamamoto, Kawabegun, near Kobe. Received January 10, 1939.		
Reported to be hybrids of <i>R. simsii</i> and <i>R. indicum</i> .		
131295. <i>Kikabu.</i>	131309. <i>Seigetsu.</i>	
131296. <i>Kingetsu.</i>	131310. <i>Shi-how.</i>	
131297. <i>Kongo.</i>	131311. <i>Sei-un.</i>	
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4 PLANT INVENTORY NO. 138		
131295 to 131321.—Continued.		
131298. <i>Kow-how.</i>	131312. <i>Shinnyo-no-tsuki.</i>	
131299. <i>Kow-koku.</i>	131313. <i>Shin-sei.</i>	
131300. <i>Kwahow.</i>	131314. <i>Shumpow.</i>	
131301. <i>Mai-hime.</i>	131315. <i>Shun-rei.</i>	
131302. <i>Musashino.</i>	131316. <i>Sohow.</i>	
131303. <i>Myogi.</i>	131317. <i>Shikun-ow.</i>	
131304. <i>Otome.</i>	131318. <i>Takara-bune.</i>	
131305. <i>Reihow.</i>	131319. <i>Tama-giku.</i>	
131306. <i>Rimpu.</i>	131320. <i>Tama-sugata.</i>	
131307. <i>Row-getsu.</i>	131321. <i>Ten-meikai.</i>	
131308. <i>Sakura-yama.</i>		

Fig. 2. USDA Plant Inventory No. 138 on page 4 showing 'Shinnyo-no-tsuki' as PI131312 in a group of plants described as "Reported to be hybrids of *R. simsii* and *R. indicum*." Photo by William C. Miller III.

task this was going to be. I also went back and looked at the many fine Satsuki articles that have appeared in *The Azalean* which were conveniently listed chronologically by Jim Trumbly in an article published in the Winter 2016 issue.² Fully expecting to find general agreement among the sources, it didn't turn out that way. I knew then that this was going to be a challenging undertaking since I couldn't even find consensus on the formula that was attributed to 'Shinnyo-no-tsuki' or the English translation of the cultivar name. Translations of the Japanese cultivar name from several sources include Everlasting Moon, Eternal Moon, and Angel's Moon.³ In an email, Trumbly explained that one thing that sometimes explains conflicting translations of kanji is whether one uses the old or newer kanji translation (Chinese or Japanese convention). He was told by friends/Satsuki experts that both are used and it depends on the cultivar.

I learned a long time ago that behind every beautiful flower there is a story. I couldn't learn anything useful about the origin of 'Shinnyo-no-tsuki' when I let my fingers do the walking through the internet. To complicate matters further, it became apparent that the 'Shinnyo-no-tsuki' story is bigger than I realized and includes 'Kusudama', 'Shinnyo-no-hikari', and 'Sumizome'; and a paradigm shift in Satsuki development. As I am not a Japanese horticulturist and I don't read kanji, the Satsuki dictionaries, which are written in kanji (Japanese words), hiragana (other Japanese words), katakana (foreign loan-words), and Romaji (Roman spellings of Japanese words) were not helpful.

It is said that the Japanese particularly like the extreme variability of the Satsuki flower coloration. I don't share that view, and I perceive the variability to be potentially a major problem in propagating plants that are true to the official description. Ben Morrison demonstrated his understanding of flower behavior (and the relevance to propagation) in an original drawing that I found in the files at the Glenn Dale Plant Introduction Station. Dr. Charles Evans and I published the drawing in a 1985 article entitled "Pattern of Sporting."⁴ Do not misunderstand. Morrison was personally fascinated by the variability of the Satsuki, and he had a substantial Satsuki collection in Pass Christian; but he didn't feel that Satsuki were desirable for the trade, since the trade had a preference for plants that do not require special treatment or handling. Careless propagation of highly variable azaleas can be disastrous and can create confusion that would take years to resolve, if ever. Incidentally, and this is key, Jim Trumbly's article entitled "Propagating Multi-Patterned Satsuki"⁵ should be required reading for anyone who presumes to propagate azaleas... especially Satsuki Azaleas. If you don't know your *sokojiro* from your *fukurin* or understand the intricacies of Satsuki behavior you're going to screw up big time if you fail to exercise the requisite care.⁶

The Reach of 'Shinnyo-no-tsuki'

One measure of an azalea is its "reach" or impact. The value of a cultivar is not solely how well it sells, but also whether it catches the imagination of the bonsai and hybridizing communities. Like countless other azaleas, did it disappear almost immediately after it was introduced? The answer is no. I found plenty of evidence that 'Shinnyo-no-tsuki' is a common subject for bonsai treatment. One advertisement that I found was for a 30-year-old bonsai specimen, and all they wanted was EUR 1,290.00 or just a little over \$1,300. The record also shows that 'Shinnyo-no-tsuki' was well received by the hybridizing community. By my count, 27 of the 454 Glenn Dale Hybrids were derived from crosses which used 'Shinnyo-no-tsuki' as the pollen parent (Example: 'Martha Hitchcock'). Morrison also used 'Shinnyo-no-tsuki' to produce three of his Back Acres Hybrids (Example: 'Painted Tips'). Howard Kerrigan, who was a California breeder in the early 1950s, used it as a seed parent and introduced 'Fiesta'. In more recent times, Robert Gartrell used it in his Robin Hill and Cripple Creek work (Examples: 'Betty Anne Voss' and 'Indian Mound' respectively). Pete Vines used it in his Holly Springs introductions (Example: 'Blue Ice'). Buck Claggett used it in his Bowie Mill Hybrids (Example: 'Elizabeth Ann Rowe'). These are just the major, domestic hybridizing programs that we know about.



Japanese references state 'Kusudama' is a sport of 'Shinnyo-no-tsuki'. Jim Trumbly has a theory that the relationship is reversed and that 'Shinnyo-no-tsuki' was a sport from 'Kusudama'. 'Kusudama' is a multi-patterned Satsuki that exhibits a mix of all of the flower patterns. Like 'Shinnyo-no-tsuki', it was registered in the early Shōwa Era. Photo by Jim Trumbly.

Satsuki Taikan, Mrs. Maruyama, and the Paradigm Shift

The solution to my problem was to contact Jim Trumbly, explain my predicament, and ask if he could help me cut through the confusion. Jim has many years of experience with growing Satsuki and is a keen observer of azalea behavior. He is a well-respected member of the Satsuki Aikokai of Sacramento and has access to personnel and resources that I can only dream of.

With the help of Mrs. Maruyama, a Satsuki expert with the Maruyama Bonsai Nursery, they were able to extract details from *Satsuki Taikan*.⁷ The "creator" of 'Shinnyo-no-tsuki' is identified as Yoshie Aoyama. It was registered in the early Shōwa period and that would probably have been in the late 1920s or 1930s. The formula for 'Shinnyo-no-tsuki' is 'Zetsurin' × 'Adesugata'. The formula for the seed parent, 'Zetsurin', is 'Kyokkonishiki' × 'Shikainami'. 'Adesugata', unfortunately, has unknown parentage. 'Kusudama' and 'Sumizome' are sports of 'Shinnyo-no-tsuki' and 'Shinnyo-no-hikari' is a sport derived from 'Kusudama'.

'Zetsurin' is a very large, single, *korin saki* (nearly perfectly round flower shape) flower form. It has a snow white base with *shibori*, *fukurin*, and solid red and solid white flowers. In other words, multiple flower patterns on the same plant. Mrs. Maruyama's translation of the description of 'Adesugata' was... Unknown parentage. Large single flower, white base, deep purple, *fukurin* (irregular white margin) pattern. From the early Taisho Era.

During a recent phone conversation with Jim Trumbly where we discussed 'Shinnyo-no-tsuki' and azalea behavior, I asked him if he knew how one determines which is the sport and which is the original flower?

It's sort of a brain-twister question like which came first the chicken or the egg. He offered the following comments:

"Japanese references state that 'Kusudama' is a sport of 'Shinnyo-no-tsuki'. In my experience, this seems highly unlikely; in fact, I would think it would be the opposite... that 'Shinnyo-no-tsuki' came from 'Kusudama'. The basis for this is the hierarchical dominance of different Satsuki flower patterns. Concentric patterns dominate over radial patterns. So much so, that over time I have never seen a viable exception. That is, where a branch of concentric or solid-colored flowers (selfs) is capable of producing a radial pattern (*shibori*) type flower on new growth. Not only does this apply to a branch, but also to the entire plant. Such is the case with 'Shinnyo-no-tsuki', a cultivar consisting of a single type of flower, the concentric *sokojiro* pattern. To the contrary, 'Kusudama' is a multi-patterned Satsuki with a mix of concentric and radial patterned flowers. Its *sokojiro* flower, to me, is identical to the flower of 'Shinnyo-no-tsuki'. I explained this hierarchy of Satsuki flower pattern dominance in "Propagating Multi-Patterned Satsuki," *The Azalean*, Summer 2016.

"'Kusudama' and 'Shinnyo-no-tsuki' were registered in the early Shōwa Era, latter 1920s or 1930s. 'Shinnyo-no-hikari' was registered in about 1945. 'Sumizome' has the same flower as 'Shinnyo-no-tsuki', but with a smaller leaf. The time of its creation is unknown.

"I think 'Shinnyo-no-tsuki' has great significance in the modern horticultural story of Satsuki. To appreciate this, consider the story of its grandparents, 'Kyokkonishiki', and the Belgium Indian cultivar known in Japan as 'Shikainami'. 'Kyokkonishiki' is said to have been produced in the early Taisho Era (about

'Shinnyo-no-hikari' is a highly variable sport of 'Kusudama'. It is white with flakes, stripes, and sectors of vivid purplish pink; and occasional bordered flowers resembling 'Shinnyo-no-tsuki'. It has variegated leaves, and it was registered around 1945. Photo by Jim Trumbly.



1915). It was a popular Satsuki because of its flower shape, korin, and a pure white color base with red markings. But what is unusual about its story is that it was the mother plant used by Japanese hybridizers in crosses with late blooming Belgium Indian cultivars, “Western” azaleas. I believe this was very unusual for the time, especially in light of Japanese thinking about Satsuki. Not only was there pride in their special beauty, but they were considered Japan’s very own. Also, reflect on how they taxonomically separated evergreen azaleas. Nonetheless, it marked the beginning of a new direction in Satsuki development, that of creating larger flowered Satsuki. The Belgian crosses also imparted other newer characteristics such as wavy petal margins, *namiuchi*. Among the earlier generations of these crosses, ‘Shinnyo-no-tsuki’ became one of the most popular.”

In conclusion, the use of the Belgian Indian (non-Japanese) cultivars represented a change in the development of the Satsuki Hybrids, and ‘Shinnyo-no-tsuki’, my favorite Satsuki, was an early and significant step in the forefront of that paradigm shift to increase flower size and produce cultivars with ruffled and wavy margins. Possibly, we may never be able to retrospectively determine which flower was the original flower, and it may not really matter or be a useful distinction since they are all expressions of the same genetic material. Clearly, however, it would be to everyone’s benefit for us to ensure that all propagations conform to the official descriptions.

Notes and References

1. The plural of deer is deer. The plural of Satsuki is Satsuki... and not Satsukis. See page 82 of *A Brocade Pillow*, a worthy Satsuki reference on which to base *The Azalean* editorial policy.
2. Trumbly, Jim, 2016. “Chronological List of Satsuki Articles in *The Azalean*.” *The Azalean* 38(4) 85-86.
3. I have a problem with the translations of the cultivar name in that there is not consensus, and I cannot verify them with my available resources. I don’t have the cultural background to see where they got Eternal or Everlasting. It turns out that Shinnyo was a Japanese Buddhist nun from the 13th century. With that interpretation, one could have Moon of Shinnyo or Shinnyo’s Moon which is consistent with how many Japanese azaleas are named after people or places e.g., ‘Hakatashiro’ with Hakata (the ancient name for Fukuoka) being a place and shiro meaning white.
4. Evans, Charles H. and W.C. Miller III, 1985. “Pattern of Sporting.” *The Azalean*, 7(1), pp 1-2.
5. Trumbly, Jim, 2016 “Propagating Multi-Patterned Satsuki.” *The Azalean*, 38(2): 28-30.
6. Given that any discussion of Satsuki Hybrids benefits from a certain understanding of Japanese terminology, one would be advised to get a copy of “Chart 1 Japanese Classi-



‘Sumizome’ is a sport of ‘Shinnyo-no-tsuki’ and has the same flower as ‘Shinnyo-no-tsuki’. The leaves are smaller and more round and the stamens and pistil are pale pink. Photo by Jim Trumbly.

fication of Satsuki Flower Forms” that appeared on page 36 of the Summer 2001 issue of *The Azalean* in the Jim Trumbly article entitled “The Changing Fashion of Satsuki.” The other indispensable resource is the 24 descriptions in Galle of the color patterns in Satsuki Azaleas on pages 205-207 (209-211 in the revised and enlarged Galle).

7. Suzuki, Harukichi and Masao Suzuki, 1972. *Satsuki Taikan*. Tokyo, Japan. *Satsuki Taikan* contains 1,500 descriptions of Satsuki Hybrids.

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About the Author:

William C. Miller III is a recipient of the Brookside Gardens Chapter’s Frederic P. Lee Commendation (1988) and is twice the recipient of the ASA’s Distinguished Service Award (1995 and 2002). He was chairman of the ASA’s Glenn Dale Preservation Project, and co-chairman of Dick West’s Ten Oaks Glenn Dale Project. He is past president of the Brookside Gardens Chapter, a former vice president of the ASA, a past member of the ASA Board of Directors, past co-chairman of the ASA’s Membership Committee, past chairman of the ASA’s Public Information Committee, the longest serving member of the ASA’s Editorial Advisory Board, and a frequent contributor to *The Azalean*.

Mike and Deb White
whiteaz@verizon.net

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22531 Wildcat Road
Germantown, MD 20876
301 788 3293
301 471 5958