

Morrison's Evaluation of 24 Satsuki Hybrids Including 'Shinnyo-no-tsuki'

By William C. Miller III—Bethesda, Maryland

Being interested in azaleas and living in the Washington Metropolitan area, one pretty quickly learns about Benjamin Yoe Morrison. Second acting director and first director of the US National Arboretum, he was the principal individual associated with the federal government's largest azalea development program, the 454 Glenn Dale Azaleas. Rather than take time here to review his life story, I will refer you to the previously published article "The Search for the Real Benjamin Yoe Morrison"¹ and move on to make the point that Morrison had a keen eye for detail, a sharp wit, a penchant for organizational orderliness, a landscape architect's extensive experience with plant material in general, and an understanding of the horticulture industry.

Morrison was a major player in the horticultural community during the various stages of his career... over and above his employment by the US Department of Agriculture. For example, his personal efforts on behalf of the American Horticultural Society (AHS) were extensive and included serving as the editor of their journal for many years. Still, Morrison's "attachment" to the National Arboretum and the Plant Introduction Station at Glenn Dale (aka Bell Station) continued well into his retirement to the "Back Acres" property just north of Pass Christian, Mississippi where he continued his azalea breeding and made his home with his friend, Ivan Anderson (Fig. 1). Morrison was a serious correspondent, and a lot of his correspondence survived him. Some of these letters were in his professional capacity as a USDA employee where they were subsequently discovered in old, long forgotten federal file cabinets at Glenn Dale... and some of them were personal exchanges with friends and acquaintances (e.g., Dr. John Creech, Mrs. Frances Patteson-Knight, Mrs. Corinne Murrah, and Mr. Hugh Caldwell, all long deceased). Morrison had a reputation for being a little "direct," but all of his letters were thoughtful, to the point, and fully addressing the issues at hand. All of them gave insight into his personality and character.

In retirement, Ben Morrison was a "cooperator" with the Glenn Dale Station (GDS). He was one



Fig. 1. Ben Morrison at the Back Acres, just north of Pass Christian, Mississippi, studying his azaleas. Slide obtained from the late George Harding. Photo credit: unknown.

of the favored individuals around the country who received distributions of plant material for evaluation. After a sufficient interval, it was the practice of GDS to request information on the cooperator's experience with the plants. This mechanism provided valuable feedback on the quality of the distributed material, and it served to launch the new germplasm around the country and out into the trade. In May of 1962, Dr. Joseph J. Higgins (Fig. 3), a plant physiologist at GDS, issued a request that the cooperators complete a supplied evaluation form (a checklist) on the 24 Satsuki Hybrids (which included 'Shinnyo-no-tsuki', Fig. 4) that the cooperators received in 1958 and 1959. Specifically, Dr. Higgins wanted to know "whether these plants had been injured by winter conditions and their desirability as a nursery trade plant."² Most of the cooperators did precisely as they were instructed by "checking the appropriate column." Like several of the cooperators, however, Morrison opted to write a detailed letter. While he reported that the plants successfully overwintered, he felt that the check list approach didn't adequately enable him to express his feelings.

Morrison knew the Satsuki well. At the Back Acres, he had years of experience with one of the largest personal collections of Satsuki in the South. It was Morrison's Satsuki descriptions that F. P. Lee used in *The Azalea Book* published by AHS in 1958. While he really liked the Satsuki for

Route 1 Box 24,
Pass Christian, Miss.,
23 May 1962

Dr. Joseph J. Higgins,
Glenn Dale, Maryland

Dear Dr. Higgins:

The sort of answer that I feel you should have from here, is not the kind that can be tabulated in columns. Sorry.

First of all, let me say, that I am biased in favor of these azaleas most of them satsukis.

There has been no winter injury here on any save:

226146 - Miyuno no suki, which came to me as large plants, and showed bark splitting the first winter. The wounds all healed and there has been none since.

There have been some loss of flower buds, but it follows no pattern and I cannot rightfully put it against any one of them. My own feeling (no proof) is that our changeable winter climate just caught some buds full of sap, and that was that.

Our worst damage came this winter, for all azaleas in soft growth, on March 5, when we had a 30 for one night only. Nearly all soft growth was killed back. Recovery has been excellent, and the worst cases were some of my own imports not represented in your collection. I have lost only two kinds completely, Hito-maru, killed this spring, and Seito-no-tsuki, last year, cause uncertain, probably my lack of skill. Neither of these came from Glenn Dale.

Now, for the trade. I should say NO!!!!!!!

Usually the trade, taken in its general sense will not bother with plants that do not respond to rather routine treatments. IF you have a specialty nurseryman, who is willing to do all the extra things needed to handle these plants, fine; if he has a clientele that is filled with collectors. I have no data to suggest that geography has anything to do with this. Years ago, Fruitlands, Augusta, Georgia, wrote me that the satsukis would not sell as they bloomed when roses were in flower and no one wanted azaleas with roses. (I did not then know that the South, in general is as ignorant of what azaleas can be and are, as it still is.)

The problems are several as to practice. No trouble with cuttings in most cases. But the specialty nurseryman must either, tag all branches that are sports or grow on all propagations until they have flowered. This has an immediate relation to production costs. For example. My plant of Kaho, is sharply divided into two sections one with pure white flowers and the other with pure rose pink, no stripes of other sports.

2-Higgins: May 23 1962

The problem of sports is real. I think now, that it is safe to say, that any striped flower may produce several types of sports, self white, self color of stripe or nearly that, white ground, flushed and sometimes striped with darker color, but margined with white, and usually with a dark blotch on the upper most lobe or lobes. More rarely, white with a colored margin. I have one old plant, name lost, that has been pure white for some ten years; This year, it gave whites with pink stripes and one flower of the type described above, colored with white margin. Why did it wait? I have no idea.

You probably are as aware as I am, that the nurserygrade as a whole is no longer interested in anything but foolproof items each for his area. These azaleas are certainly not foolproof!

If you want a comment, look at the few surviving in trade of the fine list we imported to PEI in 1938, 39, many of which will still hold their own with these new things. The only place where they can be had, is to order what you want propagated from Gladsay Gardens in Richmond, Va. Hohman does not have all; Tingle does not have all. So it goes.

The things are fine. I am devoted to them all, but I do not recommend them for "the trade." Sorry.

Cordially yours,

Ben Morrison
B. Y. Morrison

PS. I do not have P.I. 226143 Soga: may I?



Fig. 3. Dr. Joseph John Higgins, a plant physiologist at the U.S. Plant Introduction Station at Glenn Dale, Maryland, who studied climate effects on plant growth. Photo courtesy of and taken by Diane Lewis.

their high degree of flower variability, he couldn't recommend them for the trade as a purely practical matter. He understood that the trade generally didn't favor plants that required extra or "special handling." Propagators unable or unwilling to invest the time and effort to grow plants to sufficient size to be able to cull out sports would result in mislabeled plants or plants inconsistent with the official description. He knew full well that the ensuing confusion would only snowball, would be a disservice to the buying public, and might never be resolved. Figure 2 is Morrison's original letter from the files at Glenn Dale.³

Notes and References

1. Miller III, W.C. 1992. "The Search for the Real Benjamin Yoe Morrison." *The Azalean*, 14(3), pp 59-61.
2. Quotation from Dr. Joseph P. Higgins May 3, 1962 letter to the select group of cooperators, including Ben Morrison, who had been given the task to evaluate 24 Satsuki Hybrids. Dr. Higgins was a botanist at the Plant Introduction Station at Glenn Dale. His interest was climate effects on plant growth. A 1950 botany graduate at the University of Maryland, he subsequently earned a master's degree in plant physiology in 1951, and a Ph.D. in agronomy in 1969.
3. I'm thankful that Morrison typed many of his letters given that his penmanship was as bad as mine. His typewriter was a very old, manual typewriter. When he made a small typing mistake, he typed over it several times with the correction. When he needed to insert a Bell Number or Plant Introduction Number to specifically identify a plant or some detail that he didn't have conveniently at hand, he left a space where he could pencil in the information later.

Fig. 2. Ben Morrison's response to a request from Dr. Joseph P. Higgins for feedback on 24 Satsuki Hybrids that had been distributed from the Plant Introduction Station in Glenn Dale in 1958 and 1959. Obtained from the files at Glenn Dale. Photo credit: William C. Miller III.



Fig. 4. 'Shinnyo-no-tsuki', my current favorite Satsuki Hybrid, and one of 24 Satsuki Hybrids that was distributed by the USDA to cooperators in 1958 and 1959. See the article in the Fall 2022 issue of *The Azalean* for more about 'Shinnyo-no-tsuki'. Photo credit: William C. Miller III.

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*.

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LEGACY PROJECT OVERVIEW

A large number of hybridizers, including members of the Azalea Society of America, have developed beautiful hybrid varieties of azaleas. Many of these varieties have not been introduced to commercial markets and have not been widely distributed.

An overview to the Legacy Project itself, which describes the project and the suggested actions to be taken, and artifacts to be created or acquired, is available at <https://www.azaleas.org/legacy-project/> in the attachments section. Also available is a PowerPoint™ presentation on the overall Legacy Project.