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” 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 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.”

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...
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
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.
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.

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.