

Azaleas In Bay Country

Robert W. Hobbs — North Beach, Maryland

[Based on a talk given May 6, 2004 at the Azalea Society of America Convention, in Bowie, Maryland, Ed.]

“Bay Country” is roughly centered on Herring Bay (a prominent feature of the western shore of the Chesapeake Bay) and extends roughly from Easton on the Eastern Shore of Maryland to just west of the District of Columbia and from north of Baltimore south to Point Lookout. The area includes all of Anne Arundel, Prince George’s, Calvert, and Charles Counties, and parts of Talbot, Baltimore, and Montgomery Counties of Maryland.

A great deal of “azalea history” in North America has taken place in “Bay Country”: the formal entry of many azalea varieties and seeds into the United States from Asia at the USDA Plant Introduction Station (Glenn Dale Station) in Glenn Dale, Maryland; the development of the Glenn Dale, Belgian-Glenn Dale, Beltsville, Beltsville Dwarf, Chisolm-Merritt, Princess, “USDA,” and Marshy Point hybrids; and the introduction of the Loblolly Bay hybrids and the crosses that led to the Back Acres hybrids. This history will be described in this article.

Azaleas Native to Bay Country

Rhododendron periclymenoides (1), commonly known as Pinxterbloom Azalea (and Wild Honeysuckle) and formerly known as *R. nudiflorum* (see Photo 1), is quite common in the woods in Bay Country. We have *R. periclymenoides* in the typically very



1. *R. periclymenoides* (Photo by Bob Hobbs)

moist woods behind our garden in North Beach. The plants are medium in height and the roots are stoloniferous. White to pale pink flowers emerge at roughly the same time as the leaves. The stamens are typically three times as long as the tube. Selected plants can have very beautiful flowers.



2. ‘Choptank Rose’ (Photo by Don Hyatt)

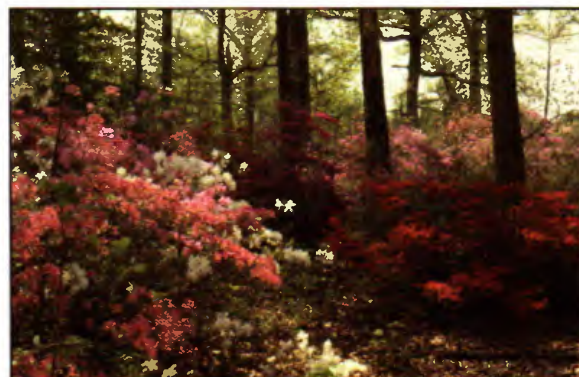
R. atlanticum (2), the Coastal Azalea, grows in the margins of woods on the coastal plains just to the east of Bay Country. The flowers are white, emerging just before or with the leaves. The plants are low growing. *R. periclymenoides* and *R. atlanticum* cross readily, resulting in the selections known as the Choptank River hybrids. (‘Choptank Rose’ is shown in photo 2.)

The USDA Plant Introduction Station

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) established an Office of Foreign Seed and Plant Introduction in 1898. In 1919 the USDA established the Plant Introduction Station (Glenn Dale Station, also known as the Glenn Dale Plant Garden) in the woods in Glenn Dale, Maryland, Prince George’s County, in the suburbs of Washington,

DC, under the direction of P. H. Dorsett, a well known plant explorer for whom the fall blooming azalea ‘Dorsett’ was named (3). Plant materials brought into the western US by plant explorers, scientists, nurserymen, and other travelers were processed through the Plant Introduction Station for inspection and quarantine. Plants so introduced into the US were given a Plant Introduction Station (PI) number once they had met approval of the Glenn Dale Station (4). Most, if not all, of the evergreen azaleas arriving from Asia, whether as plants, seeds, or cuttings spent some time at the Glenn Dale Plant Introduction Station. Thus Kurume, Satsuki, Indica, and other azalea forms obtained

from Asia by plant explorers from the Washington, DC, area such as ASA member John Creech, R. K Beattie, and many others spent substantial time at the Glenn Dale Station. The Glenn Dale hybrids were developed by Ben Morrison while he was at the Glenn Dale facility (5). In the mid-1980s there were still many azaleas in the woods in Glenn Dale (see Photo 3) including deciduous and evergreen azaleas, a great number of



3. Azaleas in the woods at Glenn Dale Station, c. 1980s (Photo by William C. Miller III)

which had lost their identification tags.

In 1983 the ASA established a Glenn Dale Preservation Project in which members of local chapters worked with USDA personnel to preserve the original azaleas that had been planted on the grounds of the facility (6). During the course of this project, a Glenn Dale hybrid,



4. 'Alexandria' (Photo by William C. Miller III)

'Alexandria' (see Photo 4), which was named but never introduced, was found (7). Eventually, lack of support on the part of the USDA personnel at the Glenn Dale Station (based on the functions being transferred elsewhere) and the resulting loss of enthusiasm of local ASA chapter volunteers resulted in abandonment of the project. The Plant Introduction Station in Glenn Dale has been closed for several years now, and the functions have been dispersed into other regional centers. The planting of azaleas that remained in the woods has been gradually deteriorating, and what will become of them is uncertain.

Takoma Park, Maryland

The city of Takoma Park, Prince George's County, Maryland, had an important role in the development of the Glenn Dale and Back Acres hybrids. The home of Ben Morrison was in the Washington suburb of Takoma Park; the house is still there. There are many homes in Takoma Park that date from the middle part of the last century. Many of these older homes had extensive plantings

of azaleas. The "Morrison House" has passed through the hands of other owners since 1952 when Morrison moved to Mississippi; and, needless to say, not all of them have treasured a garden packed with azaleas.

The city of Takoma Park remembered Ben Morrison in 1989, when a plaque in memory of Ben Morrison was placed in a small park near the center of the town and near his former home (8). A representative of the ASA was present at that ceremony.

Within a mile of the plaque is the former home of Stuart Armstrong, a friend of Ben Morrison's who was the recipient of many azalea plants. Stuart Armstrong was once the president of the American Horticultural Society. In 1992 the

Armstrong house was owned by garden writer William Poling who wrote an article for *The Azalean* on the Armstrong garden (9). At that time it was an azalea jungle with over 50 azaleas for which the name tags were attached to or located near the plants.

Azaleas That Were Hybridized in Bay Country

Glenn Dale Hybrids. Horticulturist and plant breeder Ben Morrison, who was chief of the Plant Introduction Station and director of the US National Arboretum, started the work on the Glenn Dale Hybrids in 1935. The objectives of his breeding program were: to develop plants with flowers that were as large as the Southern Indian hybrids, which were hardy in the Washington, DC, area, and which provided flowers mid-April to mid-June (10). Introduction of these hybrids began in 1941, with most being introduced from 1947 to 1949 and a few after 1952. The introductions include plants that bloom from early to late; plant sizes from dwarf to large (up to at least 10'); a

wide range of colors; a wide range of flower forms such as single, double, and hose-in-hose; flowers that vary from lightly blotched to heavily blotched, margined, or with a striking contrast in the throat; striped, sanded, or completely fascinating such as 'Cinderella' (see cover photo, *The Azalean*, Summer 2004); and which bloom from mid-April to mid-June and can be grown from Zones 6b to 9a. In total, 454 clones were named. And then there is the Sweet Pea Group (shown in Photo 5), a group of pastel shades not individually named or introduced, but part of the Glenn Dale project.

There is an interesting story told by



5. Sweet Pea azaleas at Switzers' garden (Photo by Bob Hobbs)

the late Frank White (who lived in Bay Country and was a founder of the ASA) and others (11, 12) about the selection and naming of many of the Glenn Dales. At one point in the Glenn Dale hybridization program, the USDA was coming under pressure by Congress to justify their budget, so Ben Morrison was unexpectedly pressured to name some of those "expletive deleted" Japanese flowers. In response, Morrison named many of the cultivars being tested, and needing names, quickly chose names of wives and girlfriends of colleagues at the USDA.

Back Acres Hybrids. The Back Acres hybrids were developed by Ben Morrison following his retirement from the USDA in Washington to Pass Christian, Mississippi. The 53 Back Acres hybrids were introduced in 1964. Morrison's work in



6. 'White Jade' (Photo by Bob Hobbs)

Mississippi was based on 124 flats of seedlings moved from his home in Takoma Park, Maryland (13). An extension of the Glenn Dale Hybrid Project, the Back Acre hybrids were based on his interest in late-blooming and double-flowering plants. Most of the Back Acres azalea plants are as cold resistant as the Glenn Dales (Zone 7a), but some flowers are not that cold resistant. 'White Jade' is not a double, but the bloom is 2-1/2" to 3", with wavy edges, and is one of my favorites (see Photo 6).

Chisolm-Merritt Hybrids. The 59 Chisolm-Merritt hybrids were introduced around 1947 from crosses made in 1934 by a nurseryman named Julian J. Chisolm in Garrett Park, Maryland (14). Later the plants were turned over to Dr. E. I. Merritt who named and introduced them. The hybrids are hardy from Zones 7a to 9, and are mid-season bloomers on medium to tall shrubs with single flowers. The typically similarly colored flowers are 1-1/2" to 1-3/4" in size (14). Photo 7 shows Chisolm-Merritt hybrid 'Pink Lady'.



7. 'Pink Lady' in Bill Steele's garden. (Photo by Bob Hobbs)

Beltsville (Yerkes-Pryor) Hybrids. Development of the Beltsville hybrids was begun by Guy Yerkes and Robert Pryor at the USDA Beltsville Station (Prince George's County) in 1939 (15). Upon the retirement of Yerkes in 1946, the work on these hybrids was continued by Robert L. Pryor at the Glenn Dale Station. "The objectives were the production of hardy outdoor evergreen azaleas and plants suitable for forcing by florists" (16). From an original 50,000 seedlings grown, 300 were saved, and from these 47 were named and introduced from 1950 to 1959. Many of these hybrids are white, not surprising because Kurume 'Snow' was used in 30 of the 47 introduced hybrids. One example, 'H. H. Hume' ('Indicum



8. 'H. H. Hume' (Photo by Bob Hobbs)

Album' x 'Snow'), has white 2" hose-in-hose flowers in clusters of three to five blooms on an erect spreading plant (see Photo 8).

Beltsville Dwarfs. The Beltsville Dwarf hybrids were selected by Robert Pryor from the Beltsville hybrids. In the early stages of the Beltsville Hybridization Project, the smaller seedlings were usually discarded. That procedure was changed and small seedlings were grown on, which resulted in a race of true genetic dwarfs. 'Snow' is a common parent

for the Beltsville Dwarfs. Therefore, eight of the 18 Beltsville dwarfs are white. "The dwarfs are very low growing with a compact spreading habit, with normal size flowers, early blooming with characteristics of



9. 'Flower Girl' in Bill Steele's garden (Photo by Bob Hobbs)

Kurume hybrids. Plants after 15 years vary from 16" to 24" wide and 12" to 30" high, with an average growth of 1.5" per year." (17) All are hardy in Zones 7b to 9a. Photo 9 is a Beltsville Dwarf, 'Flower Girl'.

Bob Pryor was interested in developing a yellow evergreen azalea (15). Pryor did not introduce the elusive yellow evergreen azalea that he was pursuing, but out of his research came 'Pryored', a true blue-less red, which was not introduced by him, but was later introduced by Dr.

Frank Santamour at the US National Arboretum.

Of special interest to the latter two groups of hybrids is the **Gravatt Garden**. The interests of those who have control of the funding at the USDA have changed throughout the years. In the late 1960s, the funds available for ornamental plants were not sufficient for the research on and maintenance of existing plantings. August Kehr, who was at that time chief of the Chief of the Vegetables and Ornamentals Branch in Beltsville, arranged for the Beltsville and Beltsville Dwarf hybrids to be dug and labeled for planting in the G.

Flippo Gravatt Garden in Calvert County, Maryland (18, 19). The garden was located on the high cliffs overlooking the Chesapeake Bay, which are world renowned for their 10- to 16-million-year-old fossils (20).

Mr. Gravatt and his wife Anne were plant pathologists in the USDA who had purchased 752 acres on top of these cliffs in order to establish a summer colony for scientists and other professional people. When Mr. Gravatt died in 1969, Mrs. Gravatt established a G. Flippo Gravatt Memorial Garden for the purpose of hosting the Beltsville azalea collection. Plants of all 47 of the Beltsville hybrids and 19 Beltsville Dwarf hybrids were planted there. However, through the years the garden has suffered from diminishing maintenance. When the garden was visited during the 1992 Convention, 44 Beltsville and 12 Beltsville Dwarfs remained. Last summer we visited the Gravatt Garden only to find that it has deteriorated further in the intervening 11 years. Some fine specimens still exist, however.

Loblolly Bay Hybrids. The Loblolly Bay hybrids were selected from natural seedlings of Glenn Dale azaleas by Lee Amann of Bozeman, Maryland (21). Bozeman is located on the Eastern Shore of Maryland in an area almost completely surrounded by the Chesapeake Bay. Seedlings were collected in the areas near 'Buccaneer', 'Dayspring', 'Geisha', 'Glacier', and 'Merlin', so that these Glenn Dales are expected to be the seed parents. The plants are known to be hardy in Zone 6. One of the best of the Loblolly Bay hybrids is 'Mystery', whose flower has strong purplish pink margins, with white to yellowish throat, and 2-1/2" petals. It blooms in mid-season and is upright in form. The name 'Mystery' probably means that the parents of the plant could not be guessed! (It was the cover photo for *The Azalean*, Fall 2004.)



10. 'Seattle White' (Photo by William C. Miller III)

USDA Hybrids. Two plants from the USDA Glenn Dale Station were introduced by John Creech: 'Mrs. LBJ' (22) and the very popular 'Ben Morrison' (23). 'Ben Morrison' was developed by its namesake, but was not introduced by him, and instead was introduced by John Creech in 1972. 'Mrs. LBJ' has 'Seattle White' as a seed parent. 'Seattle White' (24) was a florist's plant obtained by Ben Morrison in Seattle, Washington, and used in several crosses. In the 1980s there was one existing plant of 'Seattle White' at the Glenn Dale Station (see photo 10). It was subsequently registered by Bill Miller (25).

'B. Y. Morrison' (Photo 11) is a clone that was selected and named in honor of Ben Morrison by Henry Hohman of Kingsville Nursery (23). 'Dorsett', a selection of *R. kaempferi* seed from Japan, was selected and named by Eugene Hollowell (26) for its consistent fall flowering.



11. 'B. Y. Morrison' (Photo by William C. Miller III)

In 2002 Bill Miller introduced a new cultivar 'Brookside Delight' (27), which originated at the Glenn Dale Station from a cross made by Albert Close. Albert Close was an English-trained gardener who was chief propagator at the Glenn Dale facility from the mid-1930s until the 1950s. The seed parent was 'Seattle White'.

Belgian-Glenn Dales. The Belgian-Glenn Dales were developed by B. Y. Morrison and John L. Creech at the Glenn Dale Plant Introduction Station. The crosses were made in 1947 to try to incorporate some of the flower characteristics of the Belgian Indian hybrids into the Glenn Dales (28). Five culti-



12. 'Pink Ice' at the US National Arboretum (Photo by Bob Hobbs)

vars were introduced in 1962. One of the most popular of the Belgian-Glenn Dales is 'Pink Ice' (see photo 12). The Belgian-Glenn Dales are hardy in Zones 7b and 8, and bloom in mid-season. The plants are described as being upright rounded to 4'-6', although most that I've seen in this area are spreading, but not tall. There are additional Belgian-Glenn Dales, including 'Satellite' but they were never officially introduced.

Princess Hybrids. The Princess azaleas for greenhouse forcing and landscape planting were developed at the University of Maryland, College Park, Prince George's County, Maryland (29). The original crosses using 'Vervaeneanum' as the seed parent with Kurumes and other azal-



13. 'Princess Lindsay' in Joe Miller's garden
(Photo by Bob Hobbs)

as were made in 1950 in order to produce large flowers on relatively compact plants. Controlled crosses continued to be made until 1977. The original five introduced plants were selected by Andy Adams, Jr., of Ten Oaks Nursery and Professor Emeritus Jim Skanks of the University of Maryland and were made available to the public for the first time in the spring of 1993. The plants are broader than high. Additional selections were introduced later, making up a total of 16 Princess azaleas introduced (31, 32, 33). Photo 13 is 'Princess Lindsay'.

Marshy Point Hybrids. The Marshy Point hybrids are developed by Harry Weiskettel of the Marshy Point Nursery in Chase, Maryland. There is very little information in the azalea literature about the parentage of the hybrids. Some of the plants bear very attractive flowers.

Miscellaneous Bay Country Hybrids

In 1992, Sue and George Switzer of Port Republic, Calvert County, Maryland, introduced and registered an azalea, 'Nannie Angell', named for Sue's mother. The plant, whose parentage is unknown, has pure white strap-like petals and is slightly fragrant (33).

"Wagner's White Spider #1" was hybridized by local Maryland hybridizer Dave Wagner (34). 'Koromo-shikibu' is one of its parents. It is pure white with pointed strap-like petals "which are not fused into the usual tubular corolla but are separate."

'Landon Pride' was hybridized and introduced by Bill Miller in 1997 at the Landon School Azalea Festival (35). It has a single 2" to 2-1/4" flower, glowing purplish red with darker spots on the upper lobe and a yellowish tinge in the throat (see photo 14).



14. 'Landon Pride'
(Photo by William C. Miller III)

Acknowledgments

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Call for Azalea Pictures

If you haven't looked recently, take a few minutes and go to www.pbase.com/azaleasociety to see some of the azalea pictures we have been accumulating for the Society. Be sure to see the collection of Glenn Dale pictures and the collection of Aromi deciduous hybrid pictures.

Our goal is ambitious—we want to have accurate representative pictures of all possible azalea species and hybrids. **To do that we need your help, because you're the one taking pictures of them, whether in your garden or other gardens.**

The pictures we want for each plant include:

- the plant, far enough away to show its habit;
- a spray, to show the arrangement of flowers on the stems;
- a close-up of one or more flowers, to show the lobe shape and the col-

ors, with more pictures as needed to show any flower variations;

- a close-up of a flower from the side, to show the flare and the calyx; and
- a close-up of the leaf shape and arrangement.

The picture standards for the Web site are:

- picture size of 640x480 pixels at 72 pixels per inch,
- file size of 60KB or less,
- the name of the plant,
- the name of the photographer, and
- where and when the picture was taken.

Images from digital cameras include the date and information about the exposure in its so-called EXIF information. If you edit the picture, include that when you save it, and our picture site will automatically show the EXIF information.

Send your azalea pictures to Bob

Stelloh. If you have a lot of pictures, send them on a CD formatted to ISO 9660 standards (your CD program may offer that as an option). For a few pictures, attach them to an e-mail sent to bstelloh@mac.com. If your pictures are bigger, (they will be from most cameras), and you don't know how to make them smaller, or you don't have the time, send them as is and he will edit them to the site standards.

If you don't have any pictures to send, lend us your expertise instead—look at the pictures on the Web site carefully, and let Bob Stelloh know if you think any of them are mislabeled.

By working together, we will soon have the most comprehensive collection of azalea information and pictures available anywhere. Better yet, by being published on the Web it will be readily available to everyone interested in azaleas.

Azaleas in Bay Country—continued

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