

---

# The National Arboretum Azaleas—A Four-Year Retrospective

---

**Barbara Bullock**

*U.S. National Arboretum, Washington, District of Columbia*

---

“The Glenn Dale Azalea Hillside planting, without question, is one of the major visitor attractions at the U. S. National Arboretum. During peak flowering--the last week in April through the first week in May--up to 40,000 visitors a day have visited the grounds on weekends.”

These words began the article I wrote for the Friends of the National Arboretum (FONA) newsletter in May, 1991. Being new at the Arboretum, I felt overwhelmingly proud to be associated with this famous display. However, my next sentence went on to say:

“Many of our visitors eventually ask themselves, ‘What has happened to this azalea collection?’ Upon closer observation, the collection seems to be getting swallowed by invasive woody vines. The azaleas were being buried alive!”

After my first year at the U.S. National Arboretum, I came to realize why the Hillside plantings of azaleas on Mt. Hamilton had not been maintained. It had a great deal to do with how little was then known about its origins. Very few people remained who had any knowledge of its background. All of the National Arboretum plant collections need justification for their development and existence. Policies governing these collections focus on research or educating the visitor or both. The Hillside planting--the result of research done a half-century earlier with no known map identifying the plants--did not have the documentation needed to justify an intense investment of labor.

Since labor was short, I focused my attention on obtaining and maintaining collections of important groups of hybrid azaleas known for their hardiness, good growth, and excellent flowering characteristics in the Washington, DC, area. The very extensive azalea collections (approximately 30 acres) of the U.S. National Arboretum consist of the Morrison Garden, the Frederic P. Lee Garden, the Azalea Loop between the Morrison and Lee Gardens, and the planting of the side on Mt. Hamilton (elevation 240 ft). Many of the hybrids are located between the B. Y. Morrison and F.P. Lee Gardens, in the area known as the Azalea Loop. Of course, completing the collection of the Glenn Dale hybrid azaleas, developed and named by the Arboretum’s first Director, Benjamin Yoe Morrison (B. Y. Morrison), remained my most important objective.

At the same time, I began piecing together bits of information relating to the history of the planting from a few individuals, a few old photographs, and whatever old files remained. Most of what we now know could not have been obtained if not for the diligent research of Azalea Society of America members Richard (Dick) West and William (Bill) Miller.

As more and more information became available on the plants that Morrison had placed on Mt. Hamilton, the need for restoration of the area became increasingly apparent. The Glenn Dale plantings on the Hillside of Mt. Hamilton are a far more valuable resource at the National Arboretum than had been realized for several decades past. We now know that the Hillside planting includes many (maybe all) of the named Glenn Dale azaleas planted among the

unnamed plants Morrison had selected for further study. This is important, because these are *original* plants. Thus, in addition to the ongoing effort to establish new plantings of major hybrid groups, and to restore the formal Morrison and Lee Gardens, recovery of the Glenn Dale Hillside plantings was undertaken.

## The Morrison Garden

First, I will describe our work on the Morrison Garden. The Morrison Garden, dedicated May 4, 1954, was designed specifically for the display of the named Glenn Dale hybrid azaleas. Beginning in January, 1991, I started cleaning up and restoring the Morrison Garden. I initiated during my first winter what turned out to be a four-year project to reduce the height of some 2,000 English boxwood (*Buxus sempervirens* ‘Suffruticosa’) in hedges lining the 12 azalea beds within its walls. The slow-growing English boxwoods had grown to over three feet in height, dwarfing the Glenn Dale azaleas that were on display. Today the hedges are 18 inches high and are sheared every February.

Original Glenn Dale azalea cuttings were obtained through the Ten Oaks - Glenn Dale distribution program organized by Dick West and Bill Miller. The first 42 cultivars were planted inside the Morrison Garden in April, 1995. During the summer of 1991, a volunteer cleaned up the western wall of the garden which was thick with overgrowth. This volunteer, Steve Kish, is responsible for trimming up all the dawn redwoods and hemlocks, pulling out the vines, and reducing the American boxwoods (*Buxus* ‘Arborescens’) by cutting them back halfway in order to open up the view into the woods above. Since this proved to be such an improvement, we next fixed the steps leading up the Hillside. This gave us the first glimpse we had into the tremendous massed azalea planting to the south-west for which we had little or no information at the time.

By the spring of 1994, the Morrison Garden again attained an air of formality intended by the people who created and dedicated this garden to B. Y. Morrison.



*Morrison Garden in 1994*

### The Glenn Dale Azalea Hillside

Restoration of the azaleas above the Morrison Garden began during the fall of 1992 through the willingness, dedication, and persistence of additional volunteers. Once the azaleas above the Morrison Garden's western wall were cleaned up and mapped, the five core volunteers (known affectionately as the "Azalea Corps") continued their pattern of restoration onto the Azalea Hillside proper (the famous massed planting). These people (Jean Cox, Frank Daspit, Rita Pasztor, Ted Munter, and Jim Schmitt) began what seemed to be the impossible task of restoring the



*Volunteer Crew in April 1994*

magnificent hillside of azaleas. Joined in 1994 by Gordon Hagen, they spent one day a week the year round digging vines, cutting deadwood, nursing bee stings, scratching poison ivy rashes, trimming trees, and hauling out pile after pile of debris. By the spring of 1995, three and one-half years later, we could actually say that goal of initial vine removal from the seven-acre hillside had been achieved, and that all of the surviving azaleas on the Hillside were on their way to recovery for the first time in over two decades. During this effort, I was the only staff member involved, and we worked only one day per week. My two paid staff were focused on improving and maintaining the Azalea Loop area, the Lee Garden and the Morrison Garden. Today, restoration continues on the Hillside on Tuesdays throughout the year.

When I started working with volunteers in the Azalea Collections, I had no idea that the vines entangling these azaleas could be removed in three and one-half years (originally I thought it would take longer). The five volunteers who began the clean up of the Mt. Hamilton azaleas in the fall of 1992 have stayed with the restoration project the entire time.

Much remains to be said about the Glenn Dale azaleas and the future of the Hillside, now correctly known as the Glenn Dale Azalea Hillside. During the three and one-half year restoration of the Hillside, numerous original labels were unearthed among the azaleas. These labels are the direct

link needed for tracing this famous display planting to B. Y. Morrison's federally sanctioned hybridizing project that lasted over 22 years at Glenn Dale, Maryland. These labels carry "Bell numbers", which were used exclusively at the Glenn Dale Research Station to track the plant materials in research projects there.

It is now known with certainty that the Hillside azaleas represent approximately 1,200 of B. Y. Morrison's best selections at the time of World War II. Around 1942 Morrison's propagator, Albert Close, arranged to have these 1,200 selections reproduced in groups of 12 (some as many as 60) and during the spring of 1946, Morrison and several others planted the southern slope of Mt. Hamilton at the National Arboretum with over 15,000 azaleas in very distinct rows, covering about seven acres. With the passage of time, the plants grew and their branches intermingled. Vines such as honeysuckle, grape and poison ivy intruded, and the form of the planting was obscured. And, of course, labels were lost.

In early 1991 I met both Dick West and Bill Miller. Their unique interest in the Glenn Dale azaleas brought them to the U. S. National Arboretum and the three of us pieced together the fascinating history of the Hillside azalea planting. Details of the origin of the Glenn Dale azaleas is given in the March, 1992 issue of **THE AZALEAN: The Massed Glenn Dale Azaleas on Mt. Hamilton: A Valuable Collection at The National Arboretum**, West, Miller, and Bullock.

This year, the Friends of the National Arboretum provided funding for an intern to work on mapping the Azalea Hillside and tagging the labeled plants. Funding for internships is provided through private donations, fund raisers (such as the Rare Plant Auction and the Clambake) and by membership dues for the Friends of the National Arboretum.

In the spring of 1993, we installed the first signs to inform the public of the importance of the Glenn Dale Azalea Hillside. The next spring we installed a box on the top of Mt. Hamilton to hold an Azalea Walk brochure. By the winter of 1994-95, over 30 labels bearing Bell numbers had been found buried on or near the azaleas. These labels, which originated in Glenn Dale, Maryland, hold the key to positively identifying the azalea groups on Mt. Hamilton. For example, the label "B-32453", as shown by the research of Dick West and Bill Miller, has been positively identified as *Rhododendron simsii* 'Yeung Shaan hung', one of the pollen parents of the Glenn Dale azaleas. George Waters, the intern this year, has tagged several Bell-numbered selections along with two later Glenn Dale selections, 'Cantabile' and 'Fanfare'. His work would not have been possible without the progress of clean-up made by the volunteers. I might not have been able to sustain the volunteers' interest in this project if it had not been for the information on the origin and horticultural value of this planting passed back and forth among Dick West, Bill Miller, and myself.

Many unique flower types have been seen in the massed planting. Hopefully, we will soon know most of their origins and be able to make this information available to the public.

### The Frederic P. Lee Garden

Present at the Morrison Garden dedication in 1954 was Frederic P. Lee, author of *The Azalea Book* (printed in 1958 by D. Van Nostrand Company, Inc., Princeton, N.J., for the American Horticultural Society). *The Azalea Book* was well received by the public, then hungering for any information on the fantastic new ornamental garden shrubs.

Lee, a prominent Bethesda lawyer and an avid horticulturist, served as chairman of the National Arboretum's Advisory Council for

over 20 years. The Council made annual reports to Congress in support of the mission of the National Arboretum. As a lawyer, Lee knew how to speak to Congress. The combination of his interests and profession served the National Arboretum well. The Lee Azalea Garden was dedicated to F. P. Lee in April, 1971. This garden contains mainly Satsuki and late-blooming azaleas. The garden has a free-form shaped pond, which I later learned, was nothing like F. P. Lee's own rectangular pond. In 1991, I met Jack Cardon, a former law partner of F.P. Lee, who told me much about this man. Jack had volunteered in the azalea gardens in the past; he now is a volunteer in the Arboretum's Bonsai Collections.

The Lee Garden pond in 1992 was little more than a sink hole collecting run-off and sediment. Water was seeping into the planting bed below through its porous liner. This made the planting bed below inhospitable for the growth of azaleas.

In late September, 1993, we began to rebuild the Lee Garden pond. Leadership for the project was provided by borrowed Friendship Garden gardener, Doug Rowley. My two part-time assistants, Alan Peck and Emma Gordon, Doug, myself and machine back-up by Facilities Unit workhorse Pete Fisher, did all the work. It took us over eight months—32 cubic yards of top soil, about 27 cubic yards of sand, over 20 tons of stone donated by the Asian Valley staff, and an \$800.00 donation to purchase a 40-mil liner needed to complete the project.

By April, 1994, the Lee Garden looked like a disaster area. It had to be closed to visitors for the entire spring due to excessive mud, tractor tracks, and boulders strewn about. That summer we set the final stones, rototilled and finally reseeded the turf by August 1994. The seepage problem below the pond was now corrected and the Lower Lee bed could

be planted. In April, 1995, Phil Normandy, horticulturist for Brookside and McCrillis Gardens donated 40 Satsuki hybrid azaleas which had been growing for over ten years. They are now nestled happily in an informal rock-garden style bed below the Lee Garden Pond.

Among the unusual companion plants to be seen in the Azalea Collections are Chinese Lacebark Pine (*Pinus bungeana*), a multitude of native dogwoods, including an unusual double-flowering dogwood, (*Cornus* 'Pluribracteata') and the oldest grove of dawn redwoods (*Metasequoia glyptostroboides*) on the Arboretum grounds.

Inspiration for the improvements to the Azalea Collections began with my February 1992 visits to the Morris Arboretum, the Scott Arboretum, and Winterthur. The National Arboretum has several areas where azaleas are overgrown and are planted on fairly steep slopes on Mt. Hamilton. These Pennsylvania gardens dealt with steep slopes by using retaining walls (Scott), brick or stone drainage ditches (Winterthur and the Morris), the restoration of old azalea gardens (Winterthur, Morris and Scott).

In the summer of 1992, we installed our first two-hundred-foot drainage swale using bricks stored at the old brickyard site. Then in the fall of 1992, we rebuilt the retaining wall on the north end of the Morrison Garden. We installed steps leading from Eagle's Nest Road to the north entrance of the Morrison Garden in August 1993.

In the fall of 1992, we rerouted the first of two steep trails. The present alignment of this trail, known as the "The Upper Switchback", now reduces the amount of run-off reaching the trails below. This was the first in a series of projects to slow the run-off of storm water, a perennial problem in the Azalea Loop area.

In January, 1993, we had a donation from the Men's Garden Club of Montgomery County to install a stone retaining wall. Located just above the Lee Garden, this attractive wall now supports the lower edge of a road which was badly eroding away.

In February, 1993, we began the "Lower Switchback" or the "Capitol Columns" entrance to the Loop Area Collections. This project took over one year to complete while working on other related projects. We built retaining walls along both sides of this trail using nine truck loads of stones excavated by hand from the edge of an old field at the Beltsville Agricultural Research Center. We now have a beautiful, gently graded entrance trail into the center of the Azalea Loop area, halfway between the Lee and the Morrison Gardens. You are invited to stop by for a visit. You will be pleased at the results. The number of volunteer gardeners has increased. A revised check list of some of our azalea hybrid collections will be forthcoming. Others companion plants are being added to enhance seasons other than spring. New directional signs to guide visitors through the various trails are planned for installation in the future.

*Photographs by the author*

*Barbara L. Bullock has a Bachelor of Science Degree in Horticulture with a specialization in Landscape Design as well as a Bachelor of Fine Arts Degree from the University of Maryland. Ms. Bullock came to her current position as Curator of the Azalea Collections at the U.S. National Arboretum with over ten years of experience in the nursery and garden center industry (with specific training in nursery crop production) and love of the outdoors and working with people. Barbara has held this position since July 1990, and has been a member of the Brookside Gardens Chapter of the Azalea Society of America since May 1991. Inquiries and comments concerning this article or other pertinent questions can be made by calling Barbara at (202)245-4511. □*

## Azalea Calendar 1995

- September 16** Ben Morrison Chapter Meeting at 2:00PM
- September 26** Dallas Chapter Meeting at 7:00PM at DABS
- October 2** Brookside Gardens Chapter Meeting at Davis Library
- October 15** Deadline for receiving material (articles, advertisements, and chapter news) for the December issue of **THE AZALEAN**
- October 24** Dallas Chapter Meeting at 7:00PM at DABS
- October 28** Washington, DC area chapters invited to joint Northern Virginia ASA Chapter-Potomac Valley Chapter ARS meeting with focus on Asian influence on gardens to be held at Far East Restaurant in Bethesda, MD. For reservations call (703) 830-2656
- October 29** Richmond, Virginia Chapter Plant Auction
- December 4** Brookside Gardens Chapter Meeting at Davis Library
- 1996
- January 15** Deadline for receiving material (articles, advertisements and chapter news) for the March issue of **THE AZALEAN**
- March 28-30** ASA Annual Meeting and Convention, Dallas, Texas

## Letter to the Editor

I am very interested in propagating the 'Sports' that occur frequently on many of our Satsuki related hybrids. Not wishing to misname or rename any of them, I have a need to know the registered varietal names, if they exist, of any or all of the listed varietal sports/selves. In addition, if documentation exists specifically oriented to defining registered names of 'SPORTS', I'd like to know the source. Thank you. Here's my list:

Parent Plant	Color & Sport Description
'NIJI'	Orange Sport w/frequent Darker Stripes
'AIKOKU'	Shirofukurin
'ISSHO-NO-HARU'	Shirofukurin
'CONVERSATION PIECE'	Shirofukurin
'MEICHO'	Orange Red Sport
'GYOKUSHIN'	Light Purple Pink Sport
'JOGA'	Light Purple Pink Sport

Sincerely,  
**AZALEA SUNSET**  
**Bill McDavit**  
 674 Sunset Lakes Blvd., SW  
 Sunset Beach, NC 28468