

# BENJAMIN YEO MORRISON

by

*John C. Wister*

AMERICAN horticulturists are greatly pleased that The Royal Horticultural Society has awarded the Peter Barr Memorial Cup to BENJAMIN YEO MORRISON.

This honour is well deserved. Mr. MORRISON (or "B.Y.M.", "B.Y." or "Ben", as he is popularly called) has done more than any other person to make the modern daffodils known and loved in many sections of this country. He was one of the first, if not *the* first, to bring the modern British varieties to this country, to show them in his garden and at flower shows, to write about them and lecture about them. In fact, in the second quarter of this century he may be said to have done for daffodils in this country what the great PETER BARR had done for them in Great Britain a half-century earlier. For that reason alone it is proper that his name should in this way be linked with that of Mr. BARR.

But Mr. MORRISON's horticultural activities have not been confined to daffodils, as even a quick glance at his career will show. The Royal Horticultural Society recognized this when, in 1945, it elected him a Vice-President. One of his associates in the United States Department of Agriculture recognized it even earlier when he wrote, "The fairies that stood sponsor at the birth of B. Y. MORRISON must have been in doubt as to what special gift they should bestow upon him, so to give him a choice they placed within his reach Art, Music, Literature, and Science, whereupon he grasped them all and refused to part with any of them, but the feature of this many-sidedness which is of greatest interest to us is his love of flowers and his interest in plants."\*

Mr. MORRISON was born in Atlanta, Georgia, in 1891. He received the degrees of Bachelor of Science from the University of California in 1913, and the degree of Master of Landscape Architecture from Harvard University in 1915. He then received a Sheldon Traveling Fellowship which enabled him to spend a year in the Orient and to see and study Japanese art and Japanese horticulture. On his return, he worked for a time in the office of Ferruccio Vitale, a New York landscape architect, before serving in the army in the First World War from 1917-18 in the Camp Planning Division of the War Department.

\* J. Marion Shull, *Rainbow Fragments*, Doubleday, Doran & Company, Inc., New York, 1931, page 116.

He began his many years of service in the United States Department of Agriculture in 1920 as assistant to Dr. DAVID FAIRCHILD in the Office of Plant Exploration and Introduction. Here he became Principal Horticulturist before Dr. FAIRCHILD retired in 1928. He continued in this position for six years under Dr. K. A. RYERSON. In 1934 he succeeded Dr. RYERSON and served until 1949 as the head of all the work of exploration, introduction, testing and distribution of new plants. He brought to this country many new food, forage, and drug plants as well as ornamentals.

In addition to his duties in this office he was soon drafted to make the plans and bring together the plants for the new U.S. National Arboretum in the north-east corner of the city of Washington. The conception of this new great arboretum was largely his. In the twelve years from 1937 to 1948, under the title of "Acting" Director, he designed the different areas of the property, laid out the roads, decided upon the places for the future headquarters building, the library, herbarium and greenhouses, and began the construction and the planting of the more important botanical and horticultural collections. Only in 1948, a year or so before he retired, was he given the official title of "Director"! It takes a long time to establish an arboretum. All the plans Mr. MORRISON made have not yet been carried out, but the foundation that he laid was sound and each year now shows great progress.

During these years his own little plot of ground in the Washington suburb of Takoma Park became a veritable botanical garden of rare and beautiful plants. To this garden and as an amateur gardener he brought in, under special permit, the daffodil novelties of the BRODIE OF BRODIE, of Messrs. P. D. WILLIAMS, GUY L. WILSON, BARR, BATH, CHAPMAN, DONARD, RICHARDSON and WATTS. From this garden and not from, or because of, his official governmental position, he learned about the newer daffodils and commenced through his writings and lectures to make them known to others. In the 1920s he was largely responsible for what is today the American Horticultural Society. He has served it long as a Director and for some years as President. From 1926 to this day he has been editor of its official publication—a quarterly first called the *National Horticultural Magazine* and now renamed the *American Horticultural Magazine*. From the start this has presented serious articles from the leading botanists and horticulturists of the country and, like the *R.H.S. Journal*, it caters for serious gardeners and avoids the trivial or elementary. The articles cover every phase of horticulture and deal with both hardy and tender plants all the way from pines and palms to the

tinest bulbs and alpines. Yet many people think of Mr. MORRISON and his magazine as primarily devoted to daffodils, iris and azaleas simply because he has done so much to make each of them popular.

Mr. MORRISON wrote many long official documents but I am sure he was happiest when writing about and lecturing about his beloved daffodils. He carried on an enormous correspondence of literally thousands of letters a year, official and unofficial, to individuals and to organizations not only in the United States but all over the world. He was never too busy to answer questions, and the present writer wishes publicly to acknowledge the help and inspiration received from him over the years. Even foolish questions he usually answered patiently, but if enough foolish ones came from any one person, he was not above sarcastic answers or even public rebuke.

He had small patience with some of the employees of the Department of Agriculture who, he felt, were not active enough or enthusiastic enough in their work. He was in the 1920s particularly critical of the quarantine policies of the Federal Horticultural Board. He felt that the famous Quarantine #37 was not only unjustified but that it afforded no real protection against pests. It is interesting on looking back to see how many of the parts of this Quarantine that he criticized have since been abolished or amended.

Iris may have been his first love. He is said to have planted his first one at the age of seven. At Harvard his closest friend was ROBERT STURTEVANT, a brother of Miss GRACE STURTEVANT, who was beginning the iris-breeding work that was to make her so famous. Miss STURTEVANT named one of her early seedlings 'B. Y. Morrison'. She encouraged him to begin iris breeding and introduced his seedlings in her catalogue. They were among the best varieties of the day but, like most iris of the time, have long since been forgotten.

I had some correspondence with Mr. MORRISON in 1919 and met him at the organization meeting of the American Iris Society in January 1920. He was one of the early officers of the Society and later, in 1927, became the editor of its bulletin, a position he held for many years. In addition, he served as its secretary in the 1930s.

His interest in daffodils was almost as early. In the mid-1920s I started to go to his garden each year in early April to see his daffodils. I remember particularly the year that 'Beersheba' first bloomed in his garden. He had paid nine pounds for it the previous autumn. I considered that an unheard-of price to pay for a single bulb and, much as I admired it, I waited several years for the price to come down before I purchased it for my own collection.

After lengthy correspondence with Mr. WILSON and other breeders

whom he was to visit later on his daffodil trip to Great Britain, "B.Y." began his own breeding programme and produced some thousands of beautiful seedlings, some of which he ought to have named and introduced. He was over-modest about them and insisted, however, that they were not superior enough to, or not distinct enough from, varieties being bred in Ireland. Many visitors, however, admired them in his garden. When he exhibited them in daffodil shows many men and women were encouraged to grow and to breed daffodils.

In the winter of 1930 he gave a nearby garden club a lecture which inspired the officers of the Garden Club of Virginia to stage their first daffodil show. This first small show quickly grew into the magnificent state-wide shows held yearly in Virginia that have been called the American equivalent of the great R.H.S. London shows. These shows in their turn led to the organization of the now flourishing American Daffodil Society. The results of that one lecture alone would justify the awarding of the Barr Memorial Cup and his election to be the American Vice-President of The Royal Horticultural Society.

As I have said, nearly every issue of his magazine carried some note or illustration of a new daffodil and these notes often turned a casual reader into a daffodil enthusiast and daffodil grower. In addition, between 1935 and 1942, he edited four *American Daffodil Yearbooks* for the American Horticultural Society. These have become an important part of the American literature on daffodils.

His experience in breeding daffodils and iris led him to even greater fame when he elected to see what he could do to produce new hybrids of the azalea species of the Obtusum Section that would be particularly suited to the climate of Maryland, and Virginia and the states to the south. He felt that the Kaempferis and the Kurumes, the Ledifolias and Macranthas which were being grown in the Philadelphia and New York areas either did not grow well enough farther south or had too short a season or too narrow a range of size of shrub or colour of flowers.

I have heard it said that his superiors in the department were at first unsympathetic with his desire to produce better azaleas and that he had to undertake his breeding work in his own garden outside of office hours. I do not know how long that attitude continued to handicap him but I remember distinctly that on one of my visits in the 1930s he took me to the Government Plant Introduction Station at Glenn Dale, Maryland, and there I saw dozens of azaleas in huge pots, and each plant seemed to be covered with numbered labels on the flowers that had just been cross-pollinated.

Of the resulting thousands, or hundreds of thousands, of Glenn Dale

seedlings, over 400 were selected to be named and introduced. They are now widely grown, not only in the areas for which they were originally intended, but north to Pennsylvania and New York and on the Pacific Coast. They are remarkable for large flowers in a wide colour range from white through pink and red to purple, and for a range of season from early April until June.

Many thousands of seedlings not distinct enough to be named have been planted in great masses along one of the roads of the National Arboretum. Covering a hillside over a quarter of a mile long and several hundred yards wide they make one of the most spectacular horticultural displays to be seen in any garden in this country.

Mr. MORRISON has had many honours. In the National Arboretum the formal garden of azaleas bears his name. In addition to being a Vice-President of The Royal Horticultural Society, and the recipient of the Barr Memorial Cup, he has received the Gold Medal of the American Daffodil Society, the Liberty Hyde Bailey Medal of the American Horticultural Society, the Arthur Hoyt Scott Horticulture Medal and Award of Swarthmore College and many other awards and citations.

Since Mr. MORRISON's retirement in 1950 he has moved back to his beloved southland. In Pass Christian, Mississippi, near the Gulf of Mexico, he is now breeding azaleas particularly for that hot, muggy climate of the South and they are entirely different from the Glenn Dales and are "spectacularly fine". In daffodils, he has become particularly interested in the Tazetta group, the Jonquil group and the Cyclamineus group, and before too many years we may hear of new varieties he has raised that are particularly suited for his new environment.

The Barr Memorial Cup could not have been given to a more worthy recipient. We salute The Royal Horticultural Society for awarding it to BENJAMIN YEO MORRISON.