
THE NEWSLETTER

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The Group for Beardless Irises

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FREE MEMBERSHIP?

Alun Whitehead

No it's not a special offer.

My mind is thinking about membership to the GBI. There has been talk recently about the old and new business models and I wondered if we could learn anything from the discussion. Let us take Google as an example. If they had used the old business model, for their invaluable web search engine, they could have charged a reasonable fee (eg £10 per annum) and they may have been moderately successful. However, they choose to make it free, and reached an immensely greater audience and they are extremely profitable, relying on advertising for their revenue – this of course is the new business model.

Can we use any of the ideas here? Today all the money received from subscriptions to the GBI is used for printing and distribution of the *Review* and *Newsletter*. These costs are likely to increase annually which will mean that subscriptions will have to keep up by costing more. Some members will be happy to continue this way but others may prefer to read online for free. We are also being encouraged to use less paper.

A website alternative would cost about £100 per annum and the use of colour is not a problem. On a web-based journal, it seems feasible that membership could be free and the society's expenses paid for by the sale of plants, seeds etc.

What are the upsides? Well the first point of call for any youngster looking up information is the web. Making information freely available to all seems the most important function of a charity. The GBI could potentially reach a large number of people which can only benefit *The Iris*. Publishing on the web is a simple matter. I recognise the immense work in currently editing the various publications and feel that the editor's achievements should reach a much wider audience than just the current members.

As Treasurer of the GBI, I have been aware for some time that the Group had the ability to change the way it was working. However, all change involves risk (something the politicians never tell you when they come up with their new ideas). So this is only written to start a discussion, there are many older and wiser heads whose input is needed and principally it is a question of what you, the member, want. I just feel the Society might be making itself more vulnerable as more and more free sources of information become available by not considering the alternative. An option for non internet users might be to receive the *Review* on a CD which would still be cheaper than a printed copy.

EDITOR'S NOTES

Brita Carson

Free Membership: It would work by putting both the *Review* and *Newsletter* on our website so that anyone could access it. Hopefully it could have *links* to various other sites (eg horticultural colleges, gardening clubs and others?). We could ask for email addresses (optional) so that we could inform internet members when new information is added.

Regular members would not need to feel threatened by the change and could still retain their membership as it is or you can change to free membership. A reduction in the numbers of the *Review* and *Newsletter* to print could mean we could cope with the printing ourselves which in turn would keep down the costs.

This would be an important step forward but we need to find out what you feel about this idea. An AGM is not logistically practical so we need your feedback to let us know what you think. It could be simply a committee decision but it would be encouraging to be able to say that 50% of the members replied to our suggestion.

A new constitution would be needed to encompass the changes if you give us positive feedback.

As the sap rises let it rise in you too so that we give a positive attitude to gardens and gardening. Let us all stop the lack of interest and subsequent decline in Specialist Gardening Groups. All groups everywhere are suffering but we are allowing it to dampen our own enthusiasm. If we really love our irises, although we are spread far and wide, we have the ability to encourage all those people that we meet with our individual dedication to irises. Give a piece of one of your plants to a friend or relation but make sure it is sufficiently large to grow well. We need new younger members and it is our responsibility to teach them the language of irises.

I am dismayed to have to report the death of our LA representative Jane Cole. We have all lost not only a real iris enthusiast but also a great friend to many of us. I did not have the privilege of meeting Jane but we enjoyed blethers by letter when she sent me her articles. A short memorial follows.

The Slide Library Project is now active.

Ian Menage has started the mammoth task of cleaning, restoring and digitising the slide library which means access to photographs of irises old and new. In mid March the slides were taken to Wisley where the Selection Group of Alison Cundy, Sidney Linnegar and Ian Menage met to discuss exactly what was needed. A test selection of 400 of the circa 3,000

slides concerned were chosen.

Ian says,

“In fact many are dirty, some are in broken glass mounts etc., so it will be more of a problem than I originally thought.”

An RHS grant application was urgently started and the result should be known by end of May. Officially, no project can be started until their decision is known but the project will go ahead regardless of the decision.

Could I please ask for a little input from you. I am passionate about keeping this Group vibrant and full of energy. I was so inspired by a visit to the *Pulmonaria Day* which was on the point of disbanding but the members talked it through until the decision was reversed. It is so easy to enjoy the work of others but we need a few lines from you from ideas to criticism. You will see I have started a page of *gleanings from people and publications*. Are there any tips out there that we can all share? It would help me to think I wasn't talking to myself.

Just a reminder that subs are due for this year. Alun will enclose a reminder slip if you have still to pay.

In Memoriam

Sadly, we have lost one of our great gardening members, Jane Cole. When Jane found out that she didn't have long to live she very courageously gave all her Louisiana irises to Mark Haslett who had been to see her in happier times to ask for her help and advice when he first started to grow LAs. He will greatly miss not just her kindness but also her friendship.

Jane wrote for us in the *Review* about the highs and lows of LAs, as she modestly said, not as an expert but just as an enthusiast. Jane loved her garden and irises held that very special place in her heart. She was generous both with her knowledge gained over a lifetime and with her plants and I will treasure the ones she so kindly sent to me.

Another member who has nothing but praise for all her help and kindness is Edward Westlake. Edward will always remember Jane for the enthusiasm and encouragement she gave him when he first became interested in irises. He was greatly inspired by her garden full of beds of different irises and Jane taught him so much about them.

Jane will always be part of the BIS history being involved with it in so many ways over the years. She followed in the footsteps of her great-aunt, Gwendolyn Anley, who perhaps originally inspired her love of irises. Gwendolyn wrote two books on irises. Anyone who knew Jane will never forget her kindness and many will have plants in their gardens which will be a lasting memory of her.

Comments From The Chair

Anne Blanco White

This has been a disconcerting winter mainly because with all the talk about global warming we ignored the possibility of the weather patterns doing whatever pleased them. So we have to bear in mind that real winters may occur at intervals and, in the course of the double-take, remember that the plants are probably resigned to it anyway. The main problem is apt to occur with evergreen forms. If your plants are not dug up and reorganised too often, the chances are that the root systems are several rhizomes deep. When a thaw comes after fairly light snow and is followed by a sharp frost there will be water around the leaf bases which will freeze and the ice will cut through the leaves and wreck them. Do NOT, later in the winter, decide that your plants have been slaughtered and dig the whole site up. Put down a scattering of fertiliser and cover the site with gritty compost with an eye to replanting in the autumn. The chances are much better than evens that your plant will sprout again from rhizomes at the lower levels in the course of the year.

It is being suggested that if plants are deliberately bred to reflect sunlight this could help to cool things down. Now irises in general frequently have large, glossy leaf areas so careful selection could help to increase the reflectivity. Don't overdo it though – *reticulatas*, for instance, which flower early in the year, could contribute to restoration of the ice caps, but seriously increasing the leaf sizes could also affect the flowers and might spoil their appearance. *Sibericas* have narrowish leaves, but could be selected for shinier surfaces while *spuria* cultivars which tend to keep their leaves below the flower heads could be acceptable with wider and shinier surfaces. You know, just for the fun of it we could give the matter further thought and so justify our gardening activities. (*New Scientist* 24.1.09 p19)

Meantime, Alun is doing his bit and giving serious consideration to greater use of websites to pass information and 'publications' on to members which will mean that we have to remember to tell our officers when we change our ISPs. Madeleine is into her second seed list and is busily advertising the Society and the Group to outsiders. We have always been weak on publicity and in the present time this is a very important field. As for Brita, that is yet another really successful *Review* particularly since she has a new house and garden on her hands.

So please, everybody, encourage your bees to visit and set seeds on your spikes and then write up your views and experiences.

Carry on gardening. So I have had to install another small plant frame. In contradistinction to a frost pocket, which this patch certainly is, the place is a heat sink in summer warming up extremely fast when the sun comes

round. So it seemed necessary to have somewhere to park dormant pot plants – like *reticulatas* – where they could have some shelter from summer sun and stay relatively cool. This is now tucked away in a corner between a wall-bench and the back fence. The resulting path needed some top surfacing because it is clay and I didn't want more grass. So I got some of those interlocking plastic plates and they've worked quite well until, in early January, I went out to inspect the retics and discovered that I had parked the plastic over a large patch of snowdrops. Interestingly, the *reticulatas* I dealt with last autumn fall into two groups: these are the ones left over from 2007 and earlier. I planted the biggest bulbs around the garden and in some planters. The ones in the planters are showing activity earlier than those in the flower beds, but some in the flower beds have got round to flowering just to surprise me when I turn round in their direction. Much to my surprise, *I. winogradowii* had flowered and I thought the bulb was too small.

And, almost inevitably, just after the Early Spring Show a couple of *unguicularis* plants produced flowers. The first, doubtfully labelled Old Reticulata?, proved to be Walter Butt. The second identifiable only as a garden iris proved to be a form of *I. unguicularis* proper. It will be interesting to see if it can be persuaded to flower in mid-autumn in future. And I can only apologise for my photos on the CD with the *Review 09*. Some, sadly, are irreplaceable, but we may be able to improve on others.

Secretary's Report Madeleine Bullock

Another beautiful spring day in the garden and I plan to be weeding the flower beds and vegetable plot again this afternoon. Our garden is sheltered and it managed to avoid damage from the recent snow, however when I was weeding my iris seedling bed I noticed that a combination of dog activity (two whippets can cause quite a lot of damage when running at full speed), birds and frost had caused most of my plant labels to disappear or break, they do seem to be very brittle. Does anyone have a foolproof method of labelling young plants? I've found a marker pen that really is waterproof so it's very frustrating when the labels disintegrate.

The 2008 Seed Distribution was a great success. It was so wet and cold last summer that I thought seed wouldn't set and wouldn't dry, so I was surprised when I received so many packets of seed and equally surprised to receive a record number of orders. Thank you.

Please send in seed again this year - it's much appreciated.

If any of you are working on interesting crosses, or grow unusual beardless irises and other *Iridaceae* and would be willing to share seed I know there

are people who would love to grow them.

In the continuing search for new members and to remind the media and public of the joy of growing beardless irises, copies of the *Review* were this year mailed to Press, Media contacts and Gardening Groups.

To get the most from PR activity it is essential to have tidbits of interesting information to send out in press releases, so if you have any interesting iris introductions or cultivars, events planned, gardens open or awards won, do let me know. If you have good quality JPGs to send to the Press, please email them to me. I can't generate interest without your help.

Hopefully this activity will result in new members for the Group and encourage the cultivation and enjoyment of Irises. We've already been contacted by one national magazine. I'll keep you up to date with developments in the autumn *Review*.

LA Representative: Mark Haslett

Mark has generously volunteered to share his experience of growing Louisianas with us. He gardens in Essex and intends to keep a record of all his growing experiments with LAs and is looking forward to the challenge of getting these notoriously difficult irises to flower in different soil mixes.

Mark already has two NCCPG National Collections of carnivorous plants, *Dionaea* (Venus flytraps) and *Sarracenia* spp. and hybrids (pitcher plants) and he keeps a diary of all the relevant information concerned with them. He also grows other carnivorous plants, bog plants and pond irises.

"I currently have 25+ LA cultivars and hope to find others so I can help conserve the ones grown here in the UK as well as new ones from the US and Australia in the future.

I am interested in plant conservation and while researching American plants I discovered LAs. I found that information on them was limited and that a lot of the suppliers in the UK had a very restricted list in the *Plant Finder* with many no longer available.

I wonder if anyone can help me find any of the following. 'Golden Oldie', 'Cotton Plantation', 'Andy Dandy' and *I. fulva* 'Red Echo'".

'Golden Oldie' and 'Cotton Plantation' were both hybridised by Dunn and registered in 1994.

'Andy Dandy' was bred by Arny and registered in 1977.

I. fulva 'Red Echo' was introduced by Henry Rowlan in 1984. It is a cross between *fulva* and 'Tarnished Brass' and has been known to rebloom.

Mark's address is on page 12 or email markecp1@tiscali.co.uk.

GOING FOR A GONG

Jennifer Hewitt

The seed list that came with the *Review* in December 2008 was exciting, wasn't it? Especially the Pacific Coast iris seeds from breeders in the USA. Perhaps you got some of it and in 2010 or 2011 the first flowers will bloom.

What will you do then? Enjoy them, of course. Decide which ones you like best, hoping they'll also grow well and flower generously as you watch them in the next year or two. Develop your own judgement as to which really are good ones. Show them to family and friends who may ask for pieces when the clumps are large enough to divide. It will be nice to think of them reaching a wider audience. But will you think of taking things further, of entering them in BIS trials or the RHS Trials at Wisley? Or do you say "I'm not competitive/can't get to iris shows/have no idea how to set about it"?

Don't you think these plants need you to do your best for them?

"Full many a flower is born to blush unseen" the poet says.

What a shame that is. Should you reward their efforts by keeping them from a larger world? Are the practical difficulties really so overwhelming?

Reading the *BIS Rules for Garden Awards*, which are given in full in the 2008 *Year Book*, can, I agree, be daunting, but they're nothing like as frightening in practice and advice and help are available. At present there are often very few plants entered in the BIS trials. Whilst I do believe that my Siberian 'Peter Hewitt' deserved the Dykes Medal (look at its marks) it had just three competitors. I'd like to see many more beardless irises started on the road towards AGCs (Awards of Garden Commendation) and then competing for the Marjorie Brummitt Trophy for PCIs, the Hugh Miller Trophy for other beardless and yes, the Dykes.

If you can get to a BIS show, or one held by the Kent or West & Midlands Groups, judges will assess cut spikes for a BIS Seedling Commendation which is one way in, but not the only one. It is possible to put forward a seedling as Breeder Nominated (BN), provided you're a BIS member and have made the cross yourself or in a garden "controlled" by you.

Oh dear, that's put paid to the chances of anything raised from seed you got from the GBI or any similar source, but it's not the end of the story. It will take a bit more time, true, but we're gardeners and patience is in our nature. So your next step is to do some cross-pollinations among your plants, or leave it to the bees (remember that word "occurred" is in the *Rules*) and then raise the next generation. They *will* be eligible to enter the BIS trials. For the RHS Trials there is no such requirement and plants

raised from seed from any source can be shown to the Joint Iris Committee which meets frequently during the main iris season. They look very carefully at all cut spikes and select those which look promising, and different from others already in circulation, to be Referred for Further Assessment (RFA), i.e. grown in the Trials, with the hope of achieving the Award of Garden Merit (AGM). If you can't get to a JIC meeting it may be possible to nominate plants but you should ask a JIC member (listed in the *Year Book*) or the RHS Trials Office to advise you. Or you *may* be able to ask a friend, or a JIC member, to grow one or more plants (be reasonable, none has unlimited space) and take spikes to a future meeting.

There are RHS Trials for several types of beardless irises – Siberians, Pacific Coasts, Spuria and the Wetland Trial which includes Japanese (ensatas) and 'water' irises which will grow in moist spoil such as versicolors, pseudacorus types, and hybrids between any and all of them. The conditions haven't been suitable for laevigatas and I'm not sure about Louisianas, but the new arrangements for deeper, better-irrigated beds may help. You could ask the Trials Office for information, or Anne or Alun who, being specialists, may be better able to assess the possibilities.

So do think about having a go. You will find everyone concerned more than willing to help and advise you. Both the AGC and AGM trials are non-competitive, i.e. an iris must reach the standard to get the award but there's no 1st 2nd etc. Having got one or other (or both) it can then go into the BIS Dykes Trial for the Miller and Brummitt Trophies and the Dykes Medal. Even if it wins no award your iris will have been more widely seen and maybe do its bit to publicise the beauty of the genus, whilst if its virtues are recognised you will feel well rewarded for your part. You think it's special; is it fair to it to keep it to yourself?

Shows for you to visit this year. See new blooms and how to stage them.

BIS Late Spring Show - Saturday May 9 at Wisley.

BIS Summer Show - Saturday & Sunday 30 & 31 May at Wisley.

Kent Group Shows - May 2 at Coolings Nursery, Rushmore Hill, Knockholt, Sevenoaks, Kent

Kent Summer Show - June 6 at Otford Methodist Hall, Sevenoaks, Kent.

West & Midlands Group Show - Saturday May 23 at Norton Village Hall (between Gloucester and Tewkesbury, off A38). For further information contact Ian Powell (Show Sec.) 01873 890202

The new brooms at the RHS have come up with new names. What used to be known as the Joint Iris Committee (JIC) is now The Iris Sub Committee or ISC for short.

Gleanings from People and Publications

Brita Carson

Have you checked out Anne's recommendation for your plants after severe frost? Can you supply some hot tips that you have found work for you in your garden? Geoff Wilson from Lincolnshire has advised me to plant PCIs in full sun in Scotland which is seconded by Gareth (see below) but probably not a good idea south of Watford? Geoff has also admitted accidentally leaving PCIs in water and found they survived without problems.

Spurias. This extract is from the *Spuria News*, Summer 2008, by kind permission of the editor, Darol Jurn and the author, Jim Hedgecock. It was contained in his article *Missouri Rambling*.

“Charlie (Jenkins) feels that we get better germination if the seeds are at least 2 years old. I plant spuria seeds in open ground in rows and let them germinate naturally. I have had much better results by doing this, than putting the seeds in pots. Now comes the question for all of you. By doing this I still have seedlings germinating in one section that is 5 years old. I talked to other hybridisers that say they plant in pots and only plant what germinates the first year. I can tell you from my experience so far, that I would have missed some of the most fantastic seedlings you will ever see if I had only planted the one year seedlings. I hope this is food for thought. I wouldn't go back to pots for anything.”

PCIs. These extracts are from the *Almanac* of the Society for Pacific Coast Native Iris, Fall 2007 and I have been given permission by the authors and editor, Terri Hudson to reproduce them here.

Gwenda Harris in North Otago, New Zealand (South Island).

“Generally PCIs do well in NZ and are very popular. *Ii. tenax*, *innominata*, *douglasiana*, and *chrysophylla* do well. I have quite a big collection of hybrids and cultivars in a pretty shady woodland situation with oak, spruce and eucalyptus trees. I have given it lots of pine needle mulch and acidic fertiliser. They flower really well, year after year and some have formed quite massive clumps.

When I still ran a nursery, I used to find germination easy but potting difficult. Some years I lost about 80%. But I think I was hung up on the idea that PCIs do not like too much watering. That may be true for the mature plants but as seedlings they do need to be kept moist. I think I remember reading that if seedlings have not yet produced roots they should be just put into water until they do. This seems to work for me.”

Gareth Winter in Masterton, New Zealand (North Island)

“I was familiar with PCIs from my grandparents’ garden where a few yellow *innominata* type flowers grew in a border. When I came to grow a number of varieties, and embarked on breeding my own varieties, I thought they would do best in semi-shade, thinking they would need protection from our summer sun. That turned out to be incorrect and the plants do far better in full sun, even coping with very warm situations. I find that the best success has been with plants grown in a deep mulch of very coarse *Pinus radiata* bark, but other pines’ bark should also do well. The bark provides the good drainage that is essential to growing them if you don’t have sloping ground. Well-established plants make their way through the 6 inches or so of mulch and send roots into the ground. Plants grown in this situation are watered about once a week over the hottest period of summer, but otherwise only receive natural water.

The plants make good strong roots through the bark mulch and are easily moved, either in early autumn or in spring after flowering - or during flowering. I find they establish best in good potting mix in planter bags. These bags are kept in a more sheltered area, with shade for the first summer. They receive more watering in the nursery than in the garden. Once in pots they seem to move at any time, provided care is taken with watering until they are established in the new spot”.

Ed - Composts

Have you found the new loam based Levington John Innes compost for ericaceous plants? I only found it at the end of last year and was delighted to buy some for sowing seeds. A step forward but we need manufacturers to include a *sell by* date on all their products especially composts.

Another product that I like to add to seed compost, which I find is difficult to buy, is fine composted bark. I intend to experiment with dried and shredded bark from trees we have had cut down.

John White, Minot, Maine

“Some seed was sent to me last May but I did not plant it then. I stored it and on 1st February I gave the seeds the water treatment in the *flush for 10 days and then planted them in a flat...”

(*seeds are put in a mesh bag and hung in the toilet tank).

I could not resist this hot tip. Often you are told to soak seeds in water for a number of days changing the water frequently. I was unable to get in touch with John, a well known American hybridiser, for his permission to use this tip but I’m sure he will forgive me for ending the *Newsletter* on such an amusing idea.

OFFICERS and REPRESENTATIVES

Chairman: Mrs Anne Blanco White,
1 Portland Court, 38 Belsize Park, London NW3 4ED
Tel: 020 7435 2700. Email: anne@blanco-white.demon.co.uk

Secretary & Seed Distribution Officer: Madeleine Bullock,
Lower Craddocks, Bringsty Common, Worcester, WR6 5UW
Tel: 01886 821451 Email: madeleine@madeleinebullock.co.uk

Membership Secretary and Treasurer: Alun Whitehead,
Aulden Farm, Aulden, Leominster, Herefordshire HR6 0JT
Tel: 01568 720129 Email: cat@auldenfarm.co.uk

Editor: Mrs Brita Carson,
The Old Manse, Johnstonebridge, Lockerbie, Dumfriesshire, DG11 1ES
Tel: 01576 470647 Email: britacarson@btinternet.com

Southeast Region Representative: Mrs Olga Wells,
24 Westwood Road, Maidstone, Kent ME15 6BG
Email: olga.wells@tesco.net

Specialists:

Siberians; Mrs Jennifer Hewitt,
Haygarth, Cleeton St Mary, Cleobury Mortimer, Kidderminster.
DY14 0QU

PCIs: Fr Philip Jones,
Carmelite Monastery, Hot Pot Wynd, Dysart, Kirkcaldy, KY1 2TS
Email: Philiperding@aol.com

Spurias: Alun Whitehead, address above

Japanese: Mrs Anne Blanco White, address above

Louisianas: Mark Haslett
12 Strangman Avenue, Thundersley, Essex, SS7 1RB
Tel: 01702 558775 Email: markecp1@tiscali.co.uk

Laevigatas Mrs Galen Carter,
Rowden Gardens, Brentor, Nr Tavistock, Devon, PL19 ONG

Proof Reader

As always my sincere thanks to Jennifer Hewitt for proof reading the Newsletter. It is amazing how blind I can be when checking my own work.
