

THE NEWSLETTER

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Officers of the Group

The Group for Beardless Irises

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EDITOR'S NOTES

Brita Carson

Another busy year for everyone I expect? There have probably been good and bad things for you too. The weather has been very warm and sunny, even hot enough to be called a heat wave, and the Siberians were out very early with the majority in flower before the end of May, after the mildest winter we have had for many years with practically no ground frost followed by wet weather when it was needed. So what was bad with that? Early flowers seemed to be over in the blink of an eye. The flowering time of individual blooms was very short, not nearly long enough to enjoy them. We usually suggest visits to the garden are best in the second half of June, but that was too late this year. Roll on these sequential and reblooming plants.

Sadly Dr Rodionenko died this year at the grand old age of 101. Only a year ago all the Societies celebrated his 100th birthday with lots of best wishes sent to him. He generously gave much of his life in the experimentation of various projects with irises, producing many easier pathways to the solutions we take for granted these days. So often we read the rules but don't appreciate who produced the knowledge that we are inclined to take for granted.

I must apologise yet again for the lateness of this newsletter. This is hardly a spring newsletter as it should be. A great help would be some new people giving us their experiences in growing irises. If you think you would like to pass on what you have found from growing plants in your garden please get in touch whichever way suits you. I hate putting pressure on the same people every time to write for us and we would all enjoy new people and ideas. It encourages us all and brings new enthusiasm back into the Group.

We have started with help in planting and transplanting for newer members, this being the time of year when friends are happy to lift and share. Large clumps will be easy to move, more of a home from home, but bare rooted pieces need extra care to reward you with better flowering plants. We are assuming you are already gardeners and this time these suggestions are for planting some of the easier beardless.

Pacific Coast Irises and Spurias are two of the more difficult ones to transplant. They dislike moving and so as little disturbance as possible is best for them. Alun has some good advice on spurias and getting them to flower after their first year is the objective. They will probably have a flower bud when they are moved so you have the challenge of getting the flower buds in future years.

IN THE CHAIR

Anne Blanco White

This has been a ridiculous year. I had a snapdragon in a hideous shade of pink in flower all winter from last summer and it is still going strong. After the warm spell, everything seemed to be making up for lost time except the irises: magnolias in full flower in February, plums normal, wisterias around in April and so on and so forth. Still, the stray spurias are flowering at last so that I can identify them; the Evansias are recovering from last summer's drought and a *versicolor* collected from Sable Island, Nova Scotia, has obliged by producing a number of spikes with dark blue flowers and aubergine stems. Additionally, I have been sent some plants by Lech Komarnicki of Poland, but as they only arrived this year there isn't really anything to be said yet. And I was nicely caught by a plant which came to me as a possible *Xiphium*. I took one look at it and said 'No!'. It was clearly herbaceous so I set it out in its pot with the rest of the collection and it leafed up with a marked corkscrew of the leaves so that I decided it was probably a *kerneriana*. All well and good until I took a long cold look at it a few days ago and realised that it bore no resemblance to a guaranteed *kerneriana* I already had in the garden. Now as it happened, we had two interesting plants up for AGM consideration at the Late Spring Show. One was a pogon and the other was *typhifolia*: this too has corkscrew leaves and that is how you distinguish it from the other sibiricas, but it holds its leaves pretty well upright all the time. *Kerneriana*, on the other hand, lets the ends of the leaves droop rather elegantly.

A trial of Dutch hybrid *Xiphiums* has been set up at Wisley and the initial results are interesting. It is the first since 1948. The bulbs have been supplied by several wholesalers and, of course, there are repeat plantings of some forms. This offers a chance to see who seems to offer the best quality bulbs for long-term garden use, but it has to be remembered that breeding is mainly for the cut-flower market so that qualities one might prefer for the garden, such as three flowers instead of the conventional two, are not to be expected. The important thing is that once planted, the bulbs will continue to flower for the next few years before it becomes necessary to replant them because of overcrowding.

And, whatever your views on human responsibility for global warming, the records of weather behaviour over the last two or three centuries and research into the possible causes suggests that seasonal expectations are very unreliable indeed and if we are to keep the plants we like in good condition in our gardens, we need to think carefully about the cultural requirements and the protection they may need from meteorological mayhem.

TREASURER'S REPORT

Alun Whitehead

The accounts are a bit like the weather. If you look at the funds in the bank – glorious sunshine - whilst the year on year figures show a declining trend – summer storms. However, financially the group is well placed. The dramatic change in the figures between the two years covered reflects the change to a full colour *Review* and the fact that the seed list was sent separately.

Without the separate cost of mailing, the seed sales for 2013 would have been £164.58. We expect this year's seed list to accompany the *Review*.

	2012	2013
Subscriptions	300.93	254.00
Donations	0.00	0.00
Seed Sales	226.99	102.24
Plant Sales	0.00	-9.30
	-60.58	-48.76
Review Cost	-305.94	-465.14
Interest Received	0.60	0.60
PayPal & Bank Charges	-13.97	-5.49
Website	0.00	-77.77
Postage	-2.20	0.00
Total : Net change at bank & PayPal:	145.83	-249.62
Opening Total Bank Balance:	3315.64	3461.47
Less net decrease in funds	145.83	-249.62
	3461.47	3211.85
represented by:		
Closing Treasury AC Balance	1044.54	1045.14
less uncleared cheques:		
Closing Current AC Balance	2182.65	1854.74
Closing PayPal Balance	234.28	311.97
	3461.47	3211.85
subs paid in advance	378.43	345.50

Due to a string of hiccups this year and getting ready for an event, the accounts have not been independently reviewed. I will arrange this in the autumn and hopefully add an 'all clear' footnote in the Review.

Do we need an increase in subscription? Well, a rough budget for the current year is given below and this shows that the subscription rates are still appropriate and so no change is proposed. I hope this meets with your approval!

	UK	Europe	Outside Europe
PayPal Fee	0.2	0.20	0.20
Review Printing	2.8	2.80	2.80
Envelope	0.04	0.04	0.04
Postage	1.17	3.70	4.80
NL Printing	0.10	0.10	0.10
Envelope	0.04	0.04	0.04
Postage	0.53	1.47	2.15
Totals	4.88	8.35	10.13

On a broader note, from talking to different Garden Groups, some clear trends stand out. Their membership is ageing and people willing to take on the challenge of organisation are very much the exception. Nearly everyone has very little spare time. There is also a trend to more general interests. Talks to groups on one genus are less appealing than ones covering a broader range – especially if it goes with a 'sexy' title. The interest in-depth of our favourite genus will only appeal to a declining minority and we should be prepared for that, whilst boldly stepping forward.

SEED OFFICER

Janet Miller

This is the usual plea for any spare seeds you have this year. All my customers do appreciate the wonderful variety that you send and would like to thank you all.

THOUGHTS ON CHELSEA 2014

Jill Whitehead

Irises were certainly in abundance at Chelsea this year. There are always bearded, mind you, but this year we saw more drifts of Siberians in the Show Gardens. But I must have a little grumble - why do so many of the marquee exhibitors use bearded in their displays when a beardless would suit the bill much better? Perhaps it is to catch the Judges' eye and after all, that is the *raison d'être* behind their exhibit.

One exhibitor who used a number of Siberians was Waterside Nursery from Leicestershire, and a Gold Medal winner. They had *Iris* 'Tropic Night', 'Sparkling Rosé' and 'Silver Edge' intermingled with *Lychnis* 'White Robin', primulas and *Aruncus* 'Misty Lace'. This is a smaller *Aruncus* and gave that feathery touch which softened the planting beautifully. All looked very natural and believable. They also used *I.* 'Rigmarole', a double lilac Siberian which I do not know and must admit, I felt, did not sit well within the display. *Geum rivale*, water avens, was used to emphasise the moist planting areas. They also displayed *I. versicolor* 'Kermesina', *I. laevigata* 'Variegata' and *I.* 'Berlin Tiger' in amongst the pond planting. It was good to see the iris displayed in accurate growing conditions, because it would not have been the first time I have seen Siberians, or even bearded for that matter, planted in water!

As I said, a good number of Show gardens used Siberians, mostly older cultivars, or seed raised but the effect was stunning. My favourite was "No Man's Land" designed by Hugo Bugg, I think it was the freshness of his approach and the garden looked real rather than composed for a few days. This garden has been well covered in the press but I did notice that the available plant list did not correspond with the actual planting, certainly not, as far as the irises were concerned. *I.* 'Perry's Blue' was drifted and drift is the right word as there must have been hundreds of plants, with *Luzula nivea* and *Lysimachia atropurpurea* 'Beaujolais'. The dusky purple-pink spikes really spiced up the planting and a few *Cirsium rivulare* 'Atropurpureum' just added the extra element. The use of *Amsonia tabernaemontana* was an inspired touch, as this is often an underrated plant but the flattish starry blue flowers just picked up the iris colour perfectly. I cannot comment on whether the garden would actually function as suggested by the design brief. That is far beyond my skills. However, at least *I. sibirica* in the wild is known to follow stream courses so there is some element of realism in the design and in today's climate the control of storm water must be a major concern.

I also thought the combination of *Ranunculus acris* 'Citrina', a form of meadow buttercup with *I.* 'Persimmon' and a darker blue Siberian worked very well in the "Time to Reflect" garden designed by Adam Frost. Largish natural stone boulders were used and the irises formed a ribbon to naturally soften the boulders and to form a link between the different levels of the garden. It also

had some beautiful carved wooded seats but that is another story.

All in all I think it was a good Chelsea and, certainly, there were some inspiring design ideas.

TRANSPLANTING AND REPLANTING - NEW MEMBERS

Brita Carson

What is climate change going to do next? When can we feel it is a good time to transplant or replant? Traditionally everything was done either in autumn or spring. It is still considered that these are the best times of year, after winter or after summer, when the rains can be expected to keep the roots moist so that they can get their roots anchored and some root growth before the cold of winter or the heat of summer, especially for bare rooted material. Some other growers think it is a good time when the plants have just finished flowering and are making new roots; this time of year does mean taking greater care with watering and never allowing the plants any stress by the soil starting to dry out.

Plants bought in pots can be planted at any time, at the same depth using the same soil/compost, but if the roots are tightly packed they would appreciate gently teasing apart with an improved medium for growing. In fact all plants appreciate the improved preparation of the soil with added humus from well-rotted garden or bought compost. Any feeding is wasted until the roots have become established. Autumn planting is better with no feeding and left until spring.

SIBERIANS

Siberians would prefer soil that has a slightly lower pH than 7 but they are surprisingly tolerant of most soils and they are perfectly happy in a neutral pH of 7. The 28-chromosome ones are very hardy and will put up with all conditions except extreme drought and extreme water logging. The 40-chromosome ones are not so easy to please and prefer slightly more acidic soil with adequate water on a regular basis. If possible, avoid planting where they are going to suffer from extremes of heat, cold and cold winds but find planting sites which have plenty of sun and a moderate micro-climate.

For 28-chromosome Siberians, plant with the crown just below ground level by 1—2" and keep well watered until they become established. Plenty of sun and plenty of water, especially rain water which is slightly acidic, will keep them growing happily. Of all the cultivars of the iris species these are the easiest to grow and maintain. This year I have used gravel as a mulch because of the larvae of the crane fly.

JAPANESE

Japanese or ensatas do like a slightly acidic soil with plenty of water. They need more feeding than most other irises especially in the growing season before they flower. Cold isn't a problem but plenty of sun is necessary for good flowering, although they will still grow but don't flower well in semi-shade. Planted near, but not in, water suits them. For soil improvement, compost can be bought for acid-loving plants or ferrous sulphate added to the soil making sure it isn't made too acidic. Avoid sandy soil where water and nutrients will drain quickly away and be lost. Try to provide what is usually called a "heavy loam". Compost for acid-loving plants is better if it is mixed with other soil or compost to balance the concentration. As much available well rotted manure dug into the soil during preparation time gives them a good boost but don't use a fertiliser until the plants are well established. Again autumn planting is best left until spring before feeding. Spring planting requires both soluble and slow release feeding for the summer months once the plants look as though they are starting to grow.

PACIFIC COAST IRISES

PCIs, as they called, are not so easy for me to transplant. I prepared a bed for them specially and they did not like it. I added compost and composted bark for moisture retention; gravel to give it good drainage; perlite to aerate the mixture; and even added a little ericaceous fertiliser. No, this was not to their liking so that was the end of all the PCIs that Father Philip brought me. The next year we tried another bigger batch but still not good so the next year I moved to another patch of garden where I had cleared an area of plants and weeds. No added fertiliser, no added compost, in fact nothing at all to aid establishment and they seem to be perfectly happy flowering in great profusion. This is not helpful to anyone looking for advice growing PCIs but I have often read not to transplant into rich soil but to use ordinary garden soil. They received a small dose of granular fertiliser when their bedfellows got some in spring. One interesting point is that they now have light shade. They have flowered and set seed which has to be a good sign. Philip did bring larger and larger clumps each year thinking this would be helpful and perhaps this was half of the success, although this also doubled the pressure on me to be successful!

If anyone has discovered another method do please let us know. The new Siberians that are now growing in the bed are perfectly happy producing plenty of leaf growth and I hope flowers next year.

IRISES FOR WET BOGGY PLACES

Iris setosa is another of the easy ones to grow and, in fact, all the irises for

wet and boggy spots are relatively easy and can also be planted in as damp as possible situations or even border soil. It does need a warning in naturally damp areas. Once these irises get their feet established, they take off and quickly spread vegetatively, and it is essential to remove the seed heads after flowering if you want to preserve the purity of your cultivars. If you have plenty of space the bigger clump size makes a wonderful show (I tried to lessen their vigour by planting some in drier places but that was the year of the rains so it didn't work and they just took off as they do).

These plants prefer to be planted in a slightly acidic soil and watered with rainwater but unless you feel it is really necessary to buy ericaceous compost, any soil in "good heart" is suitable for these plants. The water irises include *Ii. versicolor*, *laevigata*, *virginica* and Louisianas.

SPURIAS

Alun Whitehead

The general advice on spurias is that they need the same conditions as bearded irises, i.e. fertile well-drained soil in a sunny position. They appreciate some lime in the soil – but being neutral at Aulden, I have never bothered to alter the pH and our spurias have to tolerate our heavy clay, which they do. They are similar to the beardeds in flowering at the end of their growth cycle, but unlike beardeds, the rhizomes are planted about 3" below soil level. In summer, during a drought, the leaves will start to die back. These can be cut back to about 6" which makes handling the transplants easier. If the leaves are still green, it would again be advisable to reduce them considerably for transplanting. The roots will start to grow with the autumn rains, so planting in late summer seems sensible. However, sense is sometimes lacking in the management of a garden, so it is good to know that "warehousing" in a deep 2L or 4L pot with occasional watering until the spring does work!

If spring planting, make sure they get some water if there is a dry spell and disturb the roots as little as possible. Similar to beardeds, the advice is to choose the new healthy growing rhizomes at the outside of the clump for replanting. Many will flower the following year, though some take a year off. If you are mean, like me, plant the old dead-looking rhizomes without any leaves showing. The dormant buds will break and usually provide a good clump, though it will take an extra year.

MURDER ON MY MIND

Brita Carson

There is a pest which is causing real problems in this area - although the problem could be more widespread because they are found worldwide. Around here this year it is likely to be very serious to farmers and their crops and it is at the highest recorded levels in 39 years. An annual survey carried out by experts from Scotland's Rural College indicates the number of this underground pest puts crops on farms, golf courses, cricket pitches and other large areas of grass at risk of severe damage.

The parent fly has various names. Here the common name is the crane fly or the very common name is the daddy-long-legs (which is applied to something else in America showing the danger of common names). The adult fly lays eggs very close, directly into the soil beside the leaves of the host plant that she has chosen. Although I'm fascinated to watch her look for a host plant, I am also ready to stop her laying eggs. She only lives, at the most, a fortnight, and her role is to find a mate, lay eggs and then die. Once the eggs hatch, these larvae quickly start chewing on the roots of their host plant which causes the plant to die. At this stage the larvae are up to 5cm long and very ungainly slow moving, a legless type of underground caterpillar or grub, almost soil-coloured and translucent.

They pupate once they have eaten enough food to produce sufficient energy to metamorphose into the adult. By this stage they have developed a hard reddish brown pupa case which gives them the common name of leatherjackets. This process in all takes 10 months and then they are ready to start the cycle all over again. The danger and damage point is eating the roots of their host. I stood on an endless number of these found under moss all round the garden after the wet, mild winter. They seemed to be everywhere in spring when I lifted pots of seedlings. I tried to encourage the birds to eat them by putting a brown saucer filled with them in the middle of their feeding area of birdseed but robins and blackbirds were the only ones interested. Starlings are good at finding them in the grass but are not regulars in this garden. We have a rookery not far away but we are small fry for them although they visit the fields around us when the crops are cut.

There is such an epidemic in this area that every effort needs to be made to reduce their population. The bare patches of grass is the obvious way to see where they have been chewing and eating roots. The leaves of plants turn yellow then brown and die which is too late by then for revival. I don't know what the farmers are allowed to use to spray the areas.

The most likely cause of the epidemic was the extremely wet summers and autumns of two consecutive years, four years ago. They are found in damp

places just below soil level where they live until they become an adult. I have watched the adults home in on irises rather than anything else round about. But it isn't just monocotyledons they attack - in the *Collins Guide to Pests, Diseases and Disorders of Garden Plants* they list cabbages, lettuces and strawberries as well as ornamental plants, seedlings and young plants.

An extract from the local paper - *The Annandale Herald*

“While over 90% of the fields sampled contained more than 0.6 million grubs per hectare, nearly 60% of the fields harboured populations of over 2 million per hectare.

Densities like that, if left untreated, are likely to result in severe and visible damage to the grass sward of any spring crops.”

“One result showed 13.6 million grubs per hectare - the highest density we have ever found in one field.”

In the past 14 years populations have been consistently higher than before which is believed to be linked to climate change.”

The crane flies emerge from their pupae in August/September, mate and then lay about 300 eggs although I don't know how many per plant. I wouldn't attempt to spray any large areas but when you know they are the cause of losing several small new plants and seedlings it is disheartening. The only recommendation I can find is apply some HCH dust in and around the area. My usual method of defence is to put some *Ecover* washing-up liquid in a watering can and use wherever I suspect the fly may have laid her eggs. At least it will reduce the surface tension on the eggs and they should be transported further down into the soil. I have attempted to thwart the females from successfully laying their eggs at the base of new iris plants by heavily covering the area with gravel. Time will tell if this could be one answer. My knowledge of bearded irises is limited so I don't know if they are attracted to them in the same way.

A plant that has died this way will have leaves that have turned brown completely from the base up and not like normal end of summer browning from the leaf tips down. When lifted the plant is rootless. You don't really notice this in large clumps but smaller plants can be killed out completely. (Of course this may not be the cause of brown leaves in your garden. There are always other possibilities in gardening.)

Could we please have a hard frost this winter to help reduce a large number of different pests both above and below ground? So although I don't normally have murder on my mind towards insects, this is one exception.

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