

THE NEWSLETTER

What's The News?

Editor's Notes - Brita Carson P.2

Comments From The Chair - Anne Blanco White P.4

Seed Officer - Janet Miller P.6

Iris foetidissima - Jill Whitehead P.7

*Suspicious Japanese Iris Culture - Terry Aitken,
Vancouver, WA P8*

Are You Hybridising Yet? - Brita Carson P9

Use Your Beardless Irises - Brita Carson P11

Officers of the Group P.12

The Group for Beardless Irises

Issue No. 11 Summer 2015

Editor's Notes

Brita Carson

“Ne're cast a cloot 'afore May be oot”

I thought this was just an old Scottish saying said by granny to grandchild when grandchild had taken off his vest on a very warm day before the end of May. I remember my mother-in-law saying it to our daughters who, of course, took no notice, as my grandsons will, I'm sure, do the same to me.

When you have ten minutes, or more, to spare, look up the meaning on the internet and be fascinated by the possible different spellings, origins and meanings. One is to wait until the May flower is “out” before “casting off” any winter clothes. The May flower was the name given to the Hawthorn. Well the weather is bitterly cold here and the hawthorns are in full flower so that version might not apply in Scotland this year.

However, my real interest will be assessing the flower colours when they open. Remember Jan and Marty have found that after a long, cool spring the colour develops slowly and produces flowers with a stronger depth of colour than that from a warm sunny spring which speeds up the flowering process. Could this be the consolation prize for such a cold spring?

Without a doubt Siberians are influenced by sun and heat. There has been very poor growth so far this year. Normally by now in June the leaves would be near their final height but they are less than halfway although lots of flowers are nearly open. The buds on 'Atlantic Crossing' can only be days to open at the back of the house while those at the front are possibly a week behind. I will keep a check on some others that have been split to use for pollinating. They have been removed to the relative safety of the back garden away from grandchildren and our new rescue, football crazy, collie. I particularly like 'Atlantic Crossing' because it reblooms, it is early and it is one of Olga Wells. Reblooming is a trait that is a bonus especially if I can cross it with another rebloomer like Bob Hollingworth's 'Coronation Anthem' which last year was successful for seed but not a great success with germination so far. It is always worth keeping some pollen from favourite irises of both diploids and tetraploids until the very end of the pollinating season. It is disappointing to be left with a tet. flower but only dip. pollen or vice versa. Keep the pollen dry and cold and named.

The few PCIs that I have in the garden, started to flower as if by clockwork, rather than any effect from the heat of the sun. Philip has some real beauties this year in their first flowering season. I will need to speak nicely to him for help to increase my stocks! After seeing in Aulden, Jill's beautiful dappled woodland with them in full flower I feel inspired to create a light woodland site here.

The Dutch iris have plenty of buds and one which is in flower and supposed to be 'Bronze Beauty' is a strong plant, thicker stemmed, head and shoulders above the others and the flower is a rich purple on a strong stem. Obviously not what it should be but I'll forgive it if it's going to flower like that and earlier than the others each year. Unfortunately there seems to be only one of them.

The Spurias have plenty of really tall leaves but whether I'll only have really tall leaves and no flowers I won't know for another month or so. Some new seedlings should be ready to flower but then I thought that last year. New seedlings of Siberians and ensatas are also due to make their debut although I wouldn't blame them if they didn't open when it feels like snow.

Jennifer Hewitt

Jennifer is on the move. She is moving to a house further south which is nearer her daughter. It's more a case of downsizing the garden rather than the house. It will be interesting to see which irises she takes with her as being essential for her hybridising work. I have seen photographs of the new garden and think she will make it really special. There is bound to be list upon list of her favourite plants and what she can squeeze in somewhere. The days of the lawn are numbered, I should think, although she says she will keep a little bit to break up a "solid" looking garden completely filled with plants. And a little pond is a must to encourage wildlife which Jennifer enjoys watching. And great, there is a conservatory to sit in, to look out from and to plan her ideas for the garden on cold days, although it should be several degrees warmer down there.

The move will be in summertime but no definite date yet. I'm sure you will all want to join me in wishing Jennifer all the very best in her new home. We will hope she will be settled in time to write for the *Review* and tell us which plants she took with her. Her email address will be the same but obviously her address and phone number will change. There will be a forwarding address so any mail will safely reach her for at least six months. We will include a new phone number and address in the *Review*.

When I originally made a central raised bed in this garden eight years ago I had soil delivered to fill it, not realising that amongst it was a small part of a root of the mare's tail *Equisetum*, that most dreadful of all weeds. The first year after delivery, it showed itself but only one piece which I roughed up with a pot scrubber and sprayed with weedkiller. That seemed to be successful, so I thought, but it has returned this spring, five years later, so it has got the same treatment again. Two of our daughters have also got The Weed as we call it - one lives on the outskirts of Glasgow and one the outskirts of Edinburgh. They both use a flame gun to keep it at bay in the growing season. It will always be something I have to look for annually. So beware there is never a guarantee that soil is perfectly clean.

Chairwoman's report

Anne Blanco White

The British Iris Society, like many another specialist group, isn't what it used to be. Time was there were more sub-groups: Avon, Kent, Mercia, and West Midlands were the regional ones. The Species Group was founded to cater for those with a taste for science and saving wild plants from human extravagances. The Remontant Group catered for those growing and breeding irises that would flower twice a year. Others felt that there was too much emphasis on bearded iris breeding to the disadvantage of other equally worthwhile plants and so the Siberian and Japanese Iris Group was established which later metamorphosed into the Group for Beardless Irises which as we know today caters for all the other irises which are easy to grow in garden beds. And, importantly, there were and are people who were interested in irises, but had no desire to join the main Society and had no interest in anything outside their immediate region. All these groups from the very beginning ran themselves. They were founded by individuals who wanted to concentrate either on particular geographical regions or particular types of plants. Naturally there were splendid arguments about the dual membership with many arguing for group memberships to be restricted to BIS members and others arguing for non-BIS members to be enrolled. In the end it was accepted that the groups were in effect to be semi-detached. There was no way that the main Society could subsidise groups continuously and the money raised by non-BIS members helped them to keep going. The Groups co-operated with the main Society, exhibited at shows which it organised at Vincent Square, had gardens open to members at suitable times and were responsible for their own financing, publications, shows and meetings. Members paid a subscription to the BIS and/or their group of choice. And because it was agreed that as some of their group members might not wish to join the main society they should all have their own membership arrangements. The main society had no jurisdiction over the organisation of the groups. Nevertheless there was considerable co-operation and benefits were two way. In recent years when there have been occasional problems over where to hold the various BIS shows they have been mounted with the co-operation of one or another group. Similarly, the practice has grown up of holding the BIS AGM in a different area each year.

Clearly more changes are going to happen. I would like to suggest that all our members, both of the BIS and of the GBI alone, might consider what should be done in an age when partners may prefer to stay at home and watch sport on TV rather than help to ferry plants to a show. Finance is the basic problem and after that all the ancillary activities. Basically, as a group, we don't exhibit anywhere. Various members do at the BIS shows and in

their local group shows. The *Review* and *Newsletter* provide an essential connection for members. If anyone from either membership type has any good ideas they could be floated in our publications through Brita as our editor, or through the BIS newsletter. Do, please, give the matter your consideration and let us know what you think.

One of our BIS members was very disappointed at the Summer Show to find out that the plant she bought, and has been exhibiting, as *I. douglasiana* was turned down flat by Sidney, the senior judge. Let me admit that I wouldn't have noticed, but he was right. I collected a spike for reference and said I'd have a hunt in the good books. Sidney was quite right. It wasn't a question of colour which can be very variable. It was the shape of the standards which are the same for all the PCI species. This plant had distinctly paddle shaped standards with the outer half broad and the inner half narrow and inwardly rolled. The true species do sometimes constrict their standards at the very bottom so that they can fit all the petals onto the stem, but it is always a tiny zone.

Today we had summer. For tomorrow they threaten thunderstorms. Nights are still chilly. Daytimes marred by a cold wind from the SE which certainly leaves me believing that the Arctic is melting. Worse still, I am coming to the conclusion that I can't grow foetidissimas in this garden. They start off nicely and then develop an affliction which leads to a slow death. I'm beginning to wonder if they are allergic to iron which is omnipresent in this area. There's something to check on, so I suppose it's back to Google.

However, in general, plants have flowered. My main problem was that early in the year after leaning over to inspect a plant I heard a curious creaking noise as I stood up. Inspection revealed that the middle of a plank in the decking was hauling itself back up from horizontal. It was all too clear that the decking had to go. I was lucky in that the firm I picked could fit me in between other earlier appointments. This gave rise to two complications: large quantities of plants had to be moved up onto the grass (which is slowly recovering) and the tool shed had to be emptied so that it could be moved. Half the shed contents went into the spare room and the rest into my study. One way and another it worked quite nicely though I have a small number of labels without pots and pots without labels. Time may tell.

Out front on the other hand there was an outbreak in February of a charming irid which I was reduced to asking Wisley to try and identify. I was sure I had seen it before, but couldn't find a photo and they thought it was probably *Freesia refracta*. Mmmh! Flowering out of doors in February in England? Well it was a warm winter and I didn't plant it. I think the seeds must have been non-germinators which had been dumped as compost and used for topping up the planters. You know, that needs

more thought. Still the Fool's Parsley has been abolished before it could seed all over and there's a nice crop of Enchanter's Nightshade waiting for a warm day and ruthless eviction.

On a more satisfactory note, of the four plants which Lech Komarnicki sent me one, 'Across the Ocean' has flowered in a nice, rich red/purple which glowed across the space; 'Bazyliissa' is going to flower, but too late for publication; 'Virgicorus' is taking its time settling in, but *I. virginica* itself takes a dim view of English springs and it may need a little experimental work with the hybrid; while 'Paris Blue' seriously worried me: there was an outbreak of devilishly selective slugs last autumn and I thought this had been lost, but there is a growing point of very chlorotic leaves with a pretty pink base and greening tips. It is liberally mulched with some new anti-slug material and is getting some extra feeding so I have hopes for another year. At the same time Ho Shidara's 'Rikugi-Sakura' which is a pink, flat faced Siberian has done nicely too.

Then I was given a plant from a friend's garden which was clearly mislabelled. It was allowed to grow on and at first I thought it was *I. kerneriana* because of the corkscrew leaves, but they grew too tall. It is now flowering happily as *I. typhifolia* and those leaves are the diagnostic distinction of this species in spring from *I. sibirica* - when you have the true species and not a hybrid.

The Seed Distribution Officer

Janet Miller

I am in a sea of new seedlings coming into flower. You think you have plenty of space but each year you need more space to accommodate another batch of seedlings. I am not complaining and I'm really delighted to see so many but the difficult task is now to decide what to keep and what must go.

There are so many other members, like me, who enjoy sowing seeds and having the excitement of seeing new hybrids. We would be delighted to have as many fresh seeds as you can possibly send. I never have enough to send out so please think of posting your surplus seed to me before October. It will be very much appreciated and will ensure that our next seedlist will have a varied content. Thank you so much.

Iris foetidissima

Jill Whitehead

I expect many of you will have read the excellent article by Graham Rice on *Iris foetidissima* in the latest edition of *The Plantsman* (New Series Volume 14 Part 2 June 2015). In his credits along with several others, he thanks Anne Blanco White for her help. It seems that Anne's current garden is not allowing her to grow this iris, certainly not as successfully as she would wish (see her Chairwoman's Report). I found the article interesting, very enlightening, and it started me thinking and looking more closely at the various ones that have self-seeded around our garden. For instance, I didn't know that one of the common names for it is "blue seggin". As a family we always called it the roast beef plant, which seemed strange to a vegetarian! I started to take a closer look at the flowers and noticed that even in our small patch there is quite a variation. What amazed me even more is, when you actually look more closely they are really quite beautiful. I wonder why they are so over-looked as garden plants because they do so well in even dry shady conditions. Perhaps it is because they self-seed?

Last year I obtained a white berried form from Malcolm Allison, a fellow West & Midlands Iris Group member, and he got his original plant from Richard Nutt. Many moons ago, I visited Richard's garden and it was a delight at snowdrop time, with just so much to see even at that time of year. I was pleased to see several flowers on my plant, so will look forward to seeing the white seeds. Malcolm told me a good percentage come true from seed but not all so it will be interesting to see. We also grow *I. foetidissima* 'Variegata' but this has not flowered and is not flourishing as well as I would like - perhaps I need to be kinder to it.

Graham Rice mentions some 24 named forms. I wonder if any of them are grown by our members and if so, do you find them reliable? Or perhaps you know of other local common names, as there are bound to be some regional variations. If you can contribute, I am sure our Editor would be pleased to hear from you.

SUSPICIOUS JAPANESE IRIS CULTURE

Terry Aitken, Vancouver, WA

“I recently had a conversation with a customer who had a clump of ‘Midnight Stars’ (Aitken 1988) growing in his landscape. He reported that the plant had not been moved in around 10 years and that it was growing in a circle – hollow center – and the plant was still growing well and blooming. As I thought back, I recall there was a neglected clump of ‘Midnight Stars’ in the corner of my yard that had behaved in a similar fashion. No watering; no weeding; no fertilizer and no transplanting for about 10 years. ‘Midnight Stars’ is the grandparent of ‘Midnight Fireworks’ (Aitken 2014). The year before we introduced ‘Midnight Fireworks’ we had it (along with 3 other siblings) growing in 5-year clumps. We decided to point score all of these seedlings in mid-summer, since they were still blooming, and make a final point scored decision for which one got a name and the rest went on the compost pile. These were all really large clumps. They got broken up and moved to a new location, got steer manure and watered, and they really took off. They bloomed all summer, and the last stem was frozen with five branches and double or triple sockets. Thus the “everblooming” iris.

Of special interest at this point was the observation that these plants were continuing to grow and bloom years after most JIs were in dire need of transplanting. The problem with many JIs is that they grow annual layers of roots on top of last year’s roots. Eventually - after 3 or 4 years - the plants become stunted and starved, and stop blooming. The roots have risen to the soil surface, and the plants are dying. They need to be replanted deeper to repeat the “layering up process”. We could make the distinction between JIs that “layer up” versus JIs that expand roots “horizontally”.

This is not to suggest that this phenomenon is an “Aitken exclusive”. I seem to recollect that the last time we transplanted, several of Chad Harris’ plants at the front of the alphabet were still behaving very well. Some years back, we also had a clump of ‘Red Tessa’ off in the corner of the field growing in total neglect. We managed to cut show stems from that clump when it was 6 or 7 seven years old. On another occasion there is a historical building in Vancouver which has a very large patch of Japanese irises — 3-fall dark purple species type — that were obviously not transplanted for many years, and they were still blooming! We need to make a more inclusive observation of all JIs in our garden to determine which are HORIZONTAL ROOTERS and which are VERTICAL ROOTERS. There could be a distinct cultural advantage to JIs that don’t need frequent transplanting.”

Terry Aitken (author) and Margaret Spence (editor) have very kindly given me permission to reprint this article from The Review of the Society for Japanese Irises. Volume 52, No 1, spring 2015.

ARE YOU HYBRIDISING YET?

Brita Carson

I have just bought a new, cheap piece of kit as aid for pollinating although the gale force winds just now may be just too strong for it to be any use. It is advertised as a windbreak for taking to the beach; too brightly coloured and gaudily striped for me but at least I'll be able to find it without much trouble, even if it blows into the next field. And when I've finished I can sit in its shelter and read a book!

Following my determination to get you all hybridising, this time I'm exploring the ideal temperature for pollinating so that you get the very best possible success with the most "takes". Nothing is more disappointing than waiting all summer only to find the result hasn't produced any seed. I have cultivars from these good hybridisers and I asked them for their thoughts on this subject.

Marty Schafer from Massachusetts, USA

"I've just been collecting my notes from the last few years' pollinations. I pollinate at any time of day when the flowers are not wet from dew or rain (and when no rain is expected). All times of day produce successful pods although I don't pollinate after 8pm because the light is insufficient. I don't pollinate above 30°C (85°F). I do have success pollinating at temperatures from 15°C (60°F) to 30°C (85°F). I get the fullest pods from pollinations from 21°C to 26°C (70°F to 79°F). Next year I'm going to study my failed pollinations and see if there is any trend as to time or temperature."

Lech Komarnicki from Poland

"In my garden usually there is a dew so I wait until the flowers are dry and I open them by hand. I avoid direct sunshine between noon and 3pm. In very hot and dry weather the generous watering in the evening before pollinations is advised. Then the very early hours are the best for us. Late afternoon may be also a good time. I like to pollinate at any time in cloudy days. If the pollinations are done more than one hour before the rain starts the percentage of takes is for me very good."

Some time ago, I discussed the question of temperature with Jeff Dunlop, another successful hybridiser from whom I have got some lovely plants. He gets up early in the morning and is out by 6 am when, he says, the bees are also up and working. Of course the bees aren't knowingly out to do any pollinating for us but as we know that is what happens, so if that is a good time for bees it will be a good time for us.

Another American expert who produced an enormous number of beautiful Siberians and Japanese irises was Currier McEwen who was also a pioneer in

doubling the chromosome count making diploids into tetraploids. Searching through his books for ideal hybridising conditions, here is an interesting and enlightening paragraph:

“Crosses are much more likely to be successful when it is cool and moist than when it is hot and dry. They are rarely successful on very hot dry days. Since the entire process from pollination to fertilisation takes only a few hours, a subsequent rain should not spoil the cross. If rain threatens soon, protect the cross with a “raincoat”.

In case you feel there is not anything left to achieve here is a list of objectives that Currier suggests you can consider and aim for:

- “new colors, such as green, orange, and brown;
- new color combinations and patterns;
- improved colors, to obtain spectrum reds, blues and true pinks, unmixed with lavender;
- improved features, such as ruffling, crimped edges, feathered midribs and wide, tufted styles;
- improved resistance to pests and diseases;
- miniatures with short stalks bearing flowers of proportionately small size;
- early, late, and - especially - repeat bloomers, to extend the season;
- adaptability to unfavorable conditions, to extend the growing range;
- vigorous plants and handsome foliage; fragrance.”

Currier wrote about these aims in 1996 and they have not been exhausted by anyone today so there is still plenty of new features to be achieved.

Lech also suggests some members might like to try crossing the species. One of the easiest, first of all, would be to produce a Sibtosia which is a cross between an *I. setosa* and diploid Siberian. This is likely to result in a plant which is taller, with more buds on the stem and the flowers are more like the Siberian but with shorter standards. Always put pollen from the *setosa* onto the Siberian and not the other way which seldom works.

Cal-sibs are also supposed to be easy to cross, so worth a try. This is between a 40-chromosome Californian and a Siberian that has 40 chromosomes rather than 28. The trick is to get them to flower at the same time or take pollen from the Californian and keep it cool and dry until the Siberian you would like to use obliges. The 40-chromosome irises are the ones that come from the subseries *Chrysographes* - *I. chrysographes*, *I. delavayi*, *I. forrestii*, *I. bulleyana*, *I. clarkei* and *I. wilsonii*. Occasionally Margaret and Janet have seeds of them available in the seed exchange. I had some seedlings this year that flowered for the first time. One seedling has an unusual stripe from the middle of the signal area to the tip of the fall. I will watch for it next year.

Use Your Beardless Irises

Brita Carson

This year I had an idea of doing a virtual tour of beardless irises at Chelsea from all the TV coverage. I have to admit I didn't watch afternoons but an hour in the evening was enough time spent listening to commentators. It started off quite well with film of several gardens using some simple form of blue *Siberian* which gave good shape and structure where it was needed and, of course, blue. That looked promising but more and more it became apparent that was all these designers wanted from them for their garden designs. There was no imaginary use of Siberians let alone any different colours. Yellow *pseudacorus* were used sparingly in water features but I didn't notice any ensatas or Louisianas or other water irises. This was all very disappointing when it would be easy to get them to flower at Chelsea time in May.

It is up to us to increase interest in beardless irises and this can be helped by hybridising your own which is the least expensive way to produce new and different colours. The plants don't have to be show-stoppers with some new, never before seen attribute but usually they can all have garden value and can be used successfully to draw attention to themselves. Don't hide them away at the back of the border unless you have lots to spare and can use them in many positions. If you receive any admiring comments do offer to give away small clumps. They will soon re-grow for you and fill the space with a bit of added soil/compost. I had a visit from Plant Heritage to see the Siberian Collection who encouraged me to distribute as many plants as I wanted to encourage interest to get them growing everywhere.

As I struggle to grow Pacific Coast irises and Spurias I depend on Siberians which have to be the easiest beardless irises to grow and are the least fussy although they do have the optimum conditions - plenty of sunshine, air and water, a bit of light feeding in spring and then again after flowering, and a soil which is both well drained but has had humus/compost added. The water irises encompass a variety of species from *pseudacorus*, a bit of a thug but good if you need it, ensatas also called Japanese, and the more delicate form of plants like *virginica*, *versicolor*, and *laevigata*. All these can be successfully grown in garden soil so long as they have plenty of water in the growing and flowering season. The list of beardless includes many more and there is a new book out by Kevin Vaughn which is dedicated to Beardless irises which I hope will be available shortly. I haven't seen it yet so can't give any more clues to the contents but the author hybridises irises, especially spurias, very successfully. Terry Aitken says in his opinion, it is the best book on the beardless subject that he has seen although he has only just got his copy and hasn't read it all yet. More in the *Review*.

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Jennifer is getting ready to move house and garden.