

# The Group for Beardless Irises

## Newsletter

### Summer 2019

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## **Editor's Notes**

### **Brita Carson**

We are well through August and it has been a lovely busy summer again, another unusually warm and sunny one for us up here. At times warmer than me or the garden can work in but we aren't complaining. There are even more heat waves forecast.

The early Siberians started flowering in mid-May. Each year it seems to be a little bit earlier so it is difficult to recommend times to visit them but by the end of June most of them were over for the year except the few that have reliable extended flowering. There have been some extremely good blooms and some absent altogether which is annoying when the Collection is about to move to Threave Gardens, Castle Douglas - an interesting National Trust property. Threave is worth a visit at any time of year. I had hoped to be able to accurately name all the plants before they moved there so I'm now dependent on their labels still being intact underneath where they were planted. Labels aren't the answer but I've yet to discover what is any better. Labels are attractive to birds, dogs, footballs, small children and two golden retrievers who visit regularly, giving the labels a good chew when they think no-one is watching.

At the end of May we travelled down to Leominster, Herefordshire for the Beardless Iris Day on June 1st. Another 50 members and friends were also there, all keen to listen and learn from the speakers of the day. Alun and Jill were our hosts and started off discussing the future direction of Siberian irises. Their garden with a National Collection of Siberian irises was so exciting to see when most of them were in full bloom; although it is almost impossible to see them all in flower at the same time so you need to grow as many of them as you can and visit Alun and Jill as often as you can! Alun and Jill have written a report of the day on page 5.

It is not as easy to register new irises as everyone tells you and I have lots of sympathy for you struggling to be ready and organised to meet all the criteria necessary. However we need to increase the numbers of new cultivars to be a progressive society. I feel I have at least two that have been quite consistent in growing and flowering for the last two years but I now need to check they can be moved happily and make a good clump elsewhere. It is so busy at that time that taking photographs and writing up a description is put to the back of the workload when other irises need to be assessed for hybridising, decisions made and crosses done. Naming new irises is a problem too but I have two that I hope to name and register next year. Sadly one of our sons-in-law lost both his mum and gran recently and I wondered if he would like me to name an iris after each of them. He was very pleased with that idea and chose two irises. Now I have a purpose to get them named and registered. Over winter perhaps you could think about the idea, try to be ready and we might see some new irises in two or three years.

I scored with buying bulbs this year. No, not light bulbs, but crocus and reticulatas which was great compensation for all the stupid buys that I often get. The crocuses are for scattering so not too precious but I'm sure the retics will be some of Alan McMurtrie's that are, at last, getting through to us. They are all cultivated stocks from Lincolnshire which pleases me very much. Go and buy these before they are all sold out which is my usual habit. I compared these prices with catalogue prices and they were favourable too. And there is a new kid on the block in the form of a *batalinii* tulip called 'Salmon Gem' which I couldn't resist. It looks an outstanding colour on the cover. (It may have been on the market already and I have just missed it!) Should look eye catching in the garden between April and May. No apologies for the fact that this has nothing to do with irises

There is good news that the honey fungus has taken a beating. I'm not confident enough to say it has completely disappeared but we haven't found any yet this year although we still have one compost heap to examine. The worms are returning and unfortunately so are the moles but they are better than the honey fungus. I do think that very hot dry weather after the area has been dug up and the soil loosened kills off a good bit of it. This summer has added to the very hot dry treatment of last year. There were no more losses amongst the roses or rhododendrons either but to buy replacements too soon may be foolish. I'll wait another year.

Two very special people have received gifts to recognise their long service to the British Iris Society. Margaret Criddle has been Seed Distribution Officer for over 25 years collecting seed from members, receiving orders from others and then sending the seeds out for everyone to sow and produce some wonderful plants. Perhaps her greatest achievement was making friends and contacts worldwide who happily supplied her with valuable seed for the BIS. Jennifer Hewitt has done all the jobs and roles possible for the society to her last one of Registrar for over 25 years. She has "retired" but is still guiding her daughter Rachel in the role. A very big *thank you* to them both.

## **Seeds**

It won't be long before your garden seeds will be maturing and it becomes necessary to catch them before they split open and fall. If you keep some and have any to spare, Janet Miller, address on page 12, would be very grateful to receive any of your surplus seed for the GBI seed exchange. Every year many members are keen to get the spare seed list and order seed. It is helpful to name them and send them to her in used envelopes securely sellotaped so that they don't escape and get mixed up.

Some great successes from BIS seed which have produced not only excellent plants but could be award winners too, so there is always the chance of the same from GBI seed.

# **Report from the Chair**

**Anne Blanco White**

First, let me apologise to all of you for my absence from the Beardless Iris Day meeting; the more so that Alun told me it had been a great success.

This is important in that it does give a real chance to flaunt these plants when even iris growers tend to think only in terms of bearded and then exclude the smaller forms. I was shaken a few months ago when a medical friend looked me in the eye and asked why all irises were blue. When I got my jaw back into place I assured him this was not the case though when you think about it the default colours do tend to be blue, yellow and white. Look at the blues carefully in some lighting conditions to realise that they have a range of reds embedded in their petals which breeders have managed to bring forward. My medical friend isn't a 'real' gardener so I directed him to Alan McMurtrie's website as a demonstration of what he could find to grow nowadays in his conditions. The next thing was surprise at the length of the leaves as the bulbs died down. By and large, the dwarf bulbous irises tend to grow well up steep hillsides where the cattle are taken up to feed in late season. So having gone into dormancy in the hot weather they need those leaves to feed up the bulbs for the next year in competition with other plants in their habitats.

For some weird meteorological reason we haven't had much electrical trouble in this part of the London basin though my system does feel the heat. Indeed I was doing some fancy copying the other month and really thought that dementia was beginning to set in - until I opened all the windows and the computer heaved a sigh of relief and took a deep breath.

I would guess that if enough rain got down sufficiently far to benefit root systems it would do a bit of hurried growing which had had to be put on hold until better watering took place. And I have no doubt that in practice, rainwater is better for plants than that from a hosepipe. Additionally, plants in pots, especially if recently repotted, will grow quite briskly when offered a long, cool drink.

Mind you I went into the local Homebase some years ago in search of one of those hoses which are perforated along their lengths. They had sold out, but another customer who had overheard the conversation tootled over and said it was an awful waste of money. What I should do was reach for an electric drill and drill holes along a suitable length of the hose for myself. I smiled and said a nice thank you and went home and thought. He was quite right. The garden tap for this building leaks anyway and there is some thirty yards of path between tap and flower beds so if I had a fully perforated hose there would have been an awful lot of waste water. I duly perforated a couple of yards of hose which did mean moving it fairly often, but at least the water went to the plants.

And now, just for a change, it is almost autumn, cold and wet. However it is also early so things may improve again and I can finish gardening for this season. There is an awful lot to do and I hate being chased indoors by 'light showers'. So, best of luck to all of you.

## **Beardless Iris day June 1st 2019**

### **Alun & Jill Whitehead**

When we first thought about having a Beardless Iris Day back in 2011, it seemed sensible to hold the day here with our National Collection of Siberian irises. The day was planned, speakers spoke, attendees attended and the iris were over! Unfortunately, with all these events, despite all the planning and preparation one cannot control the weather. Still, the feedback from the day and the general vibes were good so we decided to repeat the experience for this year. We are pleased to say that this year there were lots of Siberians in flower and the weather was perfect.

We started the talks off with a very brief whizz through Siberians and the way forward, just really to introduce ourselves and to welcome everybody. Tim Loe, of “Loe Books” was our first speaker. Those of you who have an interest in iris species will recognise his name as Editor of the Species Group Journal. He was both entertaining and informative, a rare combination and we learnt about the “Beardless species of Europe”. Julian Sutton was our final speaker; many will know him from his nursery “Desirable Plants” and from his writing in various publications. His talk, an updated version of “Making Sense of the Iridaceae” and as with all Julian’s talks was based on his botanical background but delivered in such a way as to be very inspiring and clear to even the novices amongst us. Julian and his wife Sarah had also brought plants for sale. Gordon Link from the Gobbett nursery joined us for the day, so that gave more plant buying opportunities, as well as horticultural books from Tim and Kate Loe.

Lunch was an informal affair, quiche and salad, followed by local fruit and meringues. There was loads of chatter everywhere and it was good to hear folk sharing their experiences. Days like this are not just about the speakers, valuable though they are, it is also about sharing thoughts and meeting like-minded folk.

Aulden Farm was next on the agenda and attendees seemed to enjoy the garden as much as the Siberians themselves, but of course it was some of the Schafer/Sacks introductions which caught the imagination of most of the people. That is not to say that Brita’s ‘Bramble Smoothie’ was not admired – it certainly was and it must have known that Brita was coming down as it was flowering its socks off!

We all enjoyed the day and by the comments and thanks we received afterwards so did many others. Our thanks go to our speakers, Tim and Julian for making the long journey from Cornwall and Devon, Brita and Tom Carson for travelling down from Scotland, Jennie and Jane, our neighbours for their invaluable help at lunch time and for coping with the four-minute dishwasher, to those who helped clear the hall and especially to all those who travelled to Herefordshire to join us for the day.

# **Blooming Siberians**

## **Alun Whitehead**

After writing about the characteristics of the Siberian species and particularly how the number of flowers on the stem may affect the flowering period, I thought I had better make a careful note of how the cultivars in our collection performed this year. A short and easy job as they flower for such a short time! Well, 'Kingfisher' was the first to flower on 1st May and at the time of writing 'Kestutis Genys' has just produced a few more, so the short task is now into its fourth month.

'Kingfisher' finally stopped flowering on 13th June giving 43 days of flower. Of course, the usual statistician's caveat applies that you cannot draw any conclusion from a single experiment. Each year will be different; how the plants have been looked after, the weather etc. With this in mind, the following flowered longest and hopefully give an indication of how they may perform.

<b>Cultivar</b>	<b>Days in flower</b>
'My Love'	78
'Dreaming Yellow'	53
'Lavender Fair'	49
'Tall Dark and Handsome'	47
'Bramble Smoothie'	46
'Cool Spring'	43
'Kingfisher'	43
'Kestutis Genys'	41
'Emily Ada'	39
'Soft Blue'	39
'Summer Sky'	39
'Silver Edge'	38

Some Siberians such as 'Kingfisher' have one flowering period, whilst others have a distinct gap. For instance, 'Soft Blue' stopped flowering on 17th June and started again on 14th July. The flowers on this type of re-bloom are often on the rhizomes at the fringe of the clump. 'My Love' is clearly a remarkable plant continuing to produce flowers for a long period after its main flush. It will be personal taste as to whether a continuing trickle of flowers is good enough to satisfy the hybridisers. 'Dreaming Yellow' was late to start flowering (5th June) but its continued popularity is understandable. 'Lavender Fair' was one that had a gap, as it started

flowering on 22nd May until 23rd June before restarting on 6th July. It was good to see other popular oldies 'Summer Sky' and 'Silver Edge' validating their continued use in many gardens.

One surprise for me was the adorable 'Emily Ada' (39 days). I had assumed that this was so close to *I. sanguinea* that the flowering period would be short, but far from it. In fact, unlike last year, with the cooler weather conditions most stems grew the branch to give the extra flower. This compares to 'Limeheart' 17 days and 'Helen Astor' 22 days which are very similar to *I. sanguinea*.

Unfortunately, flowering time alone cannot necessarily make a good plant. 'Soft Blue' despite its attractive colour often produces short or crooked stems – perhaps it needs moister conditions than our heavy clay provides?

Some clumps failed to produce any flowers. The very hot summer last year may have stopped the growth needed for this year's flower production. One notable non-performer was 'Osborne's Grey', usually such a dependable plant. Excluding the non-performers, the average flowering period was 25 days with the most common flowering time being 27 days.

Where the clumps bore only a single flower spike (usually because of recent replanting), the spike would typically produce flowers for 10 days, with the range generally from 5 – 15 days. However, in a few cases, the stem had a "rest" before producing the next flower. The most notable was 'Dirigo Black Velvet' which took 26 days to produce its three flowers.

*Ed. Would anyone else like to join us in recording how long their Siberians are in flower, from their starting dates to the last one in the clump to flower? 'Coronation Anthem' and 'Madeleine Hamilton' are still flowering here in mid-August. After the gales and torrential rain they are battered and bruised and not flowers you would want to see. Alun's list is much more impressive with clumps just flowering for a long time. Strangely this year the 'Osborne's Grey' clump produced 44 stems of flowers. As Alun says you cannot draw any conclusions on one year's results but they are interesting for observers.*

Photograph on the cover 'Emily Ada' (Ann Robinson, R. 2010) grown from BIS seed. Parentage unknown. All photographs taken in this *Newsletter* by Alun Whitehead.



'Bramble Smoothie' (Brita Carson, R. 2012) in flower 46 days



'Lavender Fair' (Robert Hollingworth, R. 1999) in flower 49 days





'Kestutis Genys' (Edmundas Kondratas' R. 2009) in flower 41 days



'Cool Spring' (W M Kellogg, R. 1939) in flower 43 days

## **Plant Feeding**

### **Brita Carson**

At this time of year, a week or two after the end of flowering (and not at the end of August as I write this), when the plants start back into root growth and bud formation preparing for next season's flowering, the plants require a feed. In nature they all survive but each year the flowers start to deteriorate and lose their vigour. The chlorophyll made by the green parts of the stems and leaves is not sufficient on its own to give the plants enough food to make the great plants and flowers you want next year. They really need additional feeding to give them that extra boost. Siberians don't need as much added feed as the Japanese iris, *Iris ensata*, and many people will tell you they never feed their Siberians.

All the gardening books say that *Iris ensata* are gross feeders but that isn't helpful without knowing how much to give, and which kind, and how often? Japanese irises grow best in acidic soils with a reading between 5.5 and 6.5 and if your soil has a high pH of over 7 (that is into the alkaline zone which is not at all good for *ensatas*), it would be easier to prepare a bed especially for them that has been filled with either home-made compost and added slow release ericaceous/sulphur pellets or bought ericaceous compost. We cannot use peat these days so other moisture retentive mediums need to be found. Coir, made from coconut husks, seems a popular alternative which has a neutral pH but once it dries out it needs to be re-soaked to take up moisture again which is very relevant after this summer's heat and drought in places. A few drops of washing-up liquid in the water will reduce the surface tension to allow it to absorb water again. Allow plenty of time for the medium to soak up the water and avoid your animals chewing coir as this can swell up in their stomachs.

Leaf mould from oak or beech leaves would be excellent for starting a bed or border or use it as a mulch. Ericaceous compost is expensive to cover a large area but sometimes necessary if you want to grow extremely good plants. Look online to read about the many different fertilisers available. I'm not necessarily advocating buying online but rather suggesting you can read about them there. Amazon sells them all so you can get some of the information you need on Vitax, Miracle Gro, Marshalls concentrated manure, Westland and Gro-Sure, just some of the makers of composts that will help you to grow good plants that thrive on compost at a low pH. It will be necessary for you to work out the quantities needed for the area to be planted.

Don't use compost or fertiliser with bonemeal in it or it would be akin to spreading lime over them and raising the pH to an unacceptably high level especially for ensatas. Siberians can probably tolerate a little bonemeal because they will grow in various soil types but still avoid it when you are investing in a new fertiliser. Calcified Seaweed is another fertiliser to give to your TBs but not to most of the beardless. One exception is the spuria which tolerates more lime than the rest. It is picky about other requirements and easily sulks, which Alun will elaborate on in the *Review*. PCIs can put up with more lime in the fertiliser than the other two but if at all possible, avoid anything that contains lime. The PCIs are tricky anyway so I would say nothing that contains lime.

If you are able to find well-rotted farmyard manure you have a bonus. Not only will the manure give the plants a wonderful variety of nutrients but it will act as a mulch in hot dry weather. It must be well rotted otherwise the roots could be scorched and the plants die.

Mulching is recommended to reduce evaporation and hold in moisture in hot dry weather, but the irises must still breathe so the mulch mustn't be applied too close to the flower stems and leaves. Ideally it would be spread onto moist ground so that the mulch is retaining the moisture. It isn't necessary to be extravagant with the mulch and only use enough to cover the root systems with up to 10cm. Several firms produce a useful concentrated manure to spread around the plants. Read the instructions carefully and don't over use.

And lastly a lecture to myself and do as I say and not as I do!!

The more often the weeds can be removed from the area the better irises will all grow. No plant likes to have their roots competing for food and moisture. Part of the feeding programme includes watering in summer to help the production of flower buds for the next year. An inch of water every week is the minimum requirement. The best water is rainwater which is naturally acidic falling in areas known to have acidic soil. Get a cheap measure for the water, one of those conical shaped ones that does the reading for you and you can work out how much they will still require to get from your hose. The seedlings have priority for rainwater from the water butt until it runs dry. And then they all have to accept tap water with all the added chlorine and other chemicals. Not tasty for plants.

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My sincere thanks to all the contributors of articles and photographs for this edition of the *Newsletter*. Please do get in touch if you have something to say and would like to write for the next edition. My thanks to Julia Carson, Marina Jackson and Alun and Jill Whitehead for all their help with proof reading and the technicalities of producing this *Newsletter*.

### **PRIVACY NOTICE**

The Group for Beardless Irises of the British Iris Society does not collect or process sensitive personal data. The personal data we use is that needed to run the Group, i.e. names, addresses and/or email addresses of members, e-members and others using our facilities, together with any payment records where applicable. We may disclose details to the British Iris Society for planning purposes, but they, and we, will not disclose any details to third parties.

If you have any concerns, please contact us [admin@beardlessirises.org](mailto:admin@beardlessirises.org) or use the Membership Secretary's address in the current *Review*.