

A close-up photograph of a purple and yellow beardless iris flower in a garden setting. The flower is the central focus, with its large, ruffled petals in shades of light purple and lavender, accented with bright yellow markings. The background is a soft-focus garden with other irises and green foliage under a bright sky.

The Review

The Group for
Beardless Irises

Issue No 6 Autumn 2009



Spuria 'Missouri Autumn' received the Eric Nies Medal in 2009. This is the highest American award for Spuria irises.



'Missouri Iron Ore' received the Eric Nies Medal in 2005. O D Niswonger bred both of these spurias.



Spuria 'Barleycorn'



Spuria 'Clara Ellen'

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Photograph on the front cover is spuria 'Arts Alive' with more examples of spurias on the facing page photographed by Alun Whitehead	

Editor's Notes

Brita Carson

An apology to start off the new year of 2010 for the lateness of this *Review*. I'm afraid editing the Year Book took up more time than I had expected, and that was quickly followed by the festive season. So apologies to those of you patiently waiting for the seed list.

On top of that I neglected to ask Anne, our Chairman, for her message to everyone before she went off on holiday to Australia. Rather than hold up printing and posting to you, I felt I should admit this little misdemeanour. I have asked Jennifer, the first Chairman of the Beardless Group, to write a message for us which she has very kindly done. I had already asked Anne for an article which she chose to write on *Iris tridentata*, one of the Series Tripetalae and with a reputation for being less than hardy which is already a real challenge to sow and grow. I wonder if Anne's will survive this winter.

Looking at the BIS and SIGNA seedlists it is fairly noticeable that the seeds being offered of beardless irises are many more than those of bearded. Could it be that beardless irises are actually more popular these days? Do their requirements suit our climate with fewer losses? This year will certainly put all plants to the test to see how they cope with the prolonged snow cover. How often you read that a plant will survive below freezing temperatures for a few days! A month being frozen and topped with snow is not what plants expect and could be too severe for many of them. And this is only January.

And wet, with lots of flooding, not the great summer we were promised. It would make you want to emigrate and the plants would be happy to go too. But it would be interesting to know how long do species take to acclimatise to new conditions and can this be accelerated. We all know that they did adapt many centuries ago but it is usually suggested it could take hundreds of years. Perhaps we need a programme of experimentation to produce strains of irises that will be happy to be flooded in summer and frozen in winter and yet put up with a general increase in temperature. So all the more reason to grow the tolerant beardless iris.

Well we are now out of the noughties and into a new decade so no matter whatever your weather there is no time to lose planning your iris season whether it be designing a new garden or redesigning an old one, hybridising to produce new flowers or sowing seed from the many sources in the seed list. As you read on you will realise that we hope to attract many new "online" members and they can come from other gardening groups and clubs here or abroad. All will be welcome and even more especially if they like writing articles for *The Review*!

Important Notice:

Under Section 3 of the Constitution, Notice is given that the Executive plan to introduce a new category of non-voting “Web Membership” from February 2010. The “Web Members” will not pay a subscription and will not receive printed copies of publications. Members have 28 days to raise any objections under Section 5. Please send these to (see below for further details)

Report from Treasurer & Membership Secretary
Alun Whitehead

Compared to the dismal depths of last year when we were wondering about the future of the World’s economies, we are a bit more relaxed now and this is a good background for a fundamental change to the group.

As you will see above, we are planning to introduce the **free** non-voting category of Web Membership from February 2010. This can work because our principal expenditure is on the printing and distribution of *The Review* and *Newsletter*, whilst publishing them on the web incurs no additional cost to that of running the website. Despite the low cost, this type of membership, hopefully, will give us greater publicity and bring the joys of growing irises to a much wider audience. If there are no objections from members this will go ahead and existing members will be able to switch to being Web Members if they prefer.

There will be a delay each year of about 4 weeks in publishing the seedlist on the web, so that existing members are not put at a disadvantage. So please remember to put your seed orders in promptly – I’m sure the canny members do already. This is unlikely to affect this year’s seedlist because it will take time for the Web search engines to pick up the change and for people to find the new site. Also I should add, membership names and addresses will **not** be published on the web.

It was with trepidation that we made the suggestion of Web Membership in this year’s BIS *Newsletter*; but to date all the responses have been positive. In fact most members have been renewing for 3 year periods. Can we take this as a vote of confidence? When the plan was originally mooted the expectation was that we would gradually migrate away from traditional hard copy publications. However, in the near term it may have a different effect; it could be that people are happy to pay the subscription for the benefit of being able to read a copy relaxing in an armchair and with the greater awareness that publishing on the web brings. We might actually get an increase of paying members. We shall see!

The Accounts for the year ended 31st December 2008

Subscriptions:	333.50
Donations	1.50
Seed Sales	93.39
Plant Sales	0.00
Newsletter Cost	-38.93
Review Cost	-130.81
Interest Received	20.69
Postage	-31.47
Total : Net increase at bank:	£247.87
Opening Total Bank Balances:	£2038.30
Plus net increase in funds	<u>£ 247.87</u>
	£2286.17

represented by:

Closing Treasury AC Balance	£1042.14
Closing Current AC Balance less uncleared cheque:	£1244.03
subs paid in advance @ 31.12.2007:	£321.66
and @ 31.12.2008:	£326.00

The accounts reflect the dates payments are made and so *The Review* cost relates to that in 2007. The cost for 2008 was £380.98 and this will be in the 2009 figures, the increase reflects the fact that we used a commercial printer. The accounts were kindly reviewed by Chris Towers, the BIS Treasurer, and a copy of his statement is available to members (send SAE or email). No matters arose which gave concern and we would like to thank Chris for giving his time so generously.

That just leaves me time to wish you a happy iris season in 2010. Let us know how it goes. Please send your photos for inclusion on the CD.

2010 SUBSCRIPTIONS ARE NOW DUE (for Hard Copies)

Please send cheque, **£4.50 for U.K. & Europe; £5.00, elsewhere** payable to: ***The Group for Beardless Irises*** in respect of your subscription 2010 to: **The Membership Secretary, GBI, Aulden Farm, Aulden, Leominster, Herefordshire, HR6 0JT.**

If it is more convenient you can pay 2 or 3 years' subscription in advance at the discounted rate of £4.00 for UK & Europe or £4.50 for non-European members.

Please include your name, address, telephone number and email address. We will publish a list of members periodically. Please indicate if you would prefer that your details are not included.

Philip Allery – A Change of Address

For reasons of age, our previous editor, Philip Allery, has a new address, which is now Long Loft Meadow, Fenside Road, Warboys, Huntingdon, Cambs. PE28 2TY where he will live with his son Martin. You will be pleased to hear that Philip's irises have also gone to a new home. They were given for a natural planting around the historic Bourne Pool which lies behind the Garden Centre of William Wheat & Son in Aldridge near to where Philip previously lived. Bourne Pool was created by damming a stream in the 15th century and can now be enjoyed by everyone.

<http://www.wmwheat.co.uk/bournepool.htm>

We wish Philip and his irises well in their new homes.

Secretary's Report

Madeleine Bullock

The sun is shining on my icy, wintry garden and I'm very excited to see what I believe are flower shoots developing on my *Iris unguicularis* (or are they new leaves?)

I started growing irises from seed 3 years ago and summer 2009 saw my first flowers. Nothing exceptional, no exciting new colours, pretty standard, but only those of you who love to grow iris from seed will understand the thrill of those first blooms.

So, how fares the GBI? Very well thanks!

Alun is working on the GBI website and his suggestions for developing it as an outstanding information resource are very exciting – more later in *The Review*.

By publishing the Seed List online we attracted orders from unexpected places – from the USA and Turkey as well as new contacts in the UK. We've some new Seed Donors this year and it's good to see more hand pollinated seed from Helmut von Kotzebue from Germany and some very interesting seed from SIGNA (Species Iris Group of North America). Jim Waddick and Jim Murrain run the seed exchange for SIGNA and contacted us earlier in the year suggesting that we exchange excess seed. We sometimes get more of one type of seed than we need, so we agreed. The Seed List has benefited greatly from the SIGNA contributions.

I'd also like to mention again the contribution from Jeff Dunlop and Sharon Hayes Whitney from the USA. Jeff started donating seed in 2001 at the request of the late Dr Currier McEwen, who asked that he carry on his tradition of giving hand crossed seed to the GBI. As he says, "sooner or later, remarkable, superlative plants will come from these donated seeds and then a simple acknowledgement of *Dunlop seed* would suffice." I'm sure we'd all be happy to acknowledge Jeff's contribution. I'd like to thank everyone who has contributed seed. Any quantities of any type of Beardless

irises are gratefully accepted.

On the PR front, we mailed copies of *The Review* to press and garden society contacts and *Garden News* gave us a double page spread on "Siberian Irises". Thanks to Alun for speaking to Clare Foggett and supplying the photos. If you have ideas for Press Releases, or any interesting pictures do let me know – irises on their own or irises in a garden situation.

While on the subject of hard work and contributions, thanks to Anne Blanco White for her expert advice answering any queries I receive and thanks to Brita for her inspired work editing *The Review*. Not an easy task – I know I couldn't do it! And thanks to Jennifer Hewitt for proof reading the Seed List. Such a great help.

My plans for 2010? Having become convinced of the importance of hand pollinating rather than relying on chance insect activity, I have plans to start hybridising myself this year. I wonder if anyone has Siberian iris 'Baby Sister', 'Sibirica Nana' or 'Sibirica Nana Alba' growing in their garden or nursery? Do let me know as I'm trying to get hold of them without great success.

Wishing you all "Happy Gardening" in 2010.

Madeleine Bullock
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Note from a Stand-In
Jennifer Hewitt

In Anne's temporary absence I've been volunteered (thank you, Alun) to write a message in her space, on the grounds that I was the first chairman of the then Siberian, Spuria and Japanese Iris Group. That position was a default one; I remember a dozen or so people in a room in the RHS New Hall who had responded to Alex Back's enthusiasm for starting a group within the BIS which would concentrate on these (and in time, other) beardless irises.

As the inspiration and obvious linch-pin of the new group, Alex's offer to be secretary was never in danger of being refused. But a chairman? Everyone had a good reason for not being able to take it on and eventually the progress round the room reached me. Thirty-three years later I've still not learnt to say "No". But it was clear that this would be mainly a decorative position as Alex would do all the real work.

The shock of his death only weeks later changed everything. I'm not going into later history as you can read it in Jill's meticulously researched article, but that we are still going, under a different title but with the same objectives, all these years later, is due to a series of determined people who kept the group alive, sometimes almost single-handed. It is right that we record what we owe to them.

And now we have Anne. Reading through her Chairman's messages reveals the breadth and depth of her knowledge. There is always something to make us think; careful observation of plants; interesting bits of news and information and, often, inferences that can be drawn from them. Alex was the original inspiration, a word I don't use lightly, and it is obvious that she is his true successor.

She is also one of those people who's always there when there's a job to be done or a report written, and she always delivers. Species Group members know that she kept that group going for years, often with very little support. I am glad that that is not the case with the GBI, that she has very solid back-up from officers who are equally determined and hard-working. Looking back is interesting, can be valuable, but looking forward as they all do is what we need. So as well as thanking Anne for all she's done and does, I'm pleased to have this opportunity to express my gratitude to them, and feel sure I speak for us all.

My grateful thanks to Jennifer for not only standing in but also for her proof reading that she does for me. I have a new saying. An Editor is only as good as her Proof Reader.

And a tip for us all from Anne

*One of Anne's typical responses, this time to a query from Turkey ... all irises without exception want all the water they can get in the early growing season which usually means that the ground needs to be saturated over winter. A serious winter drought can spell disaster. I'll be saying to my dying day that **the time to water the garden is in February** for all that the neighbours will send for the men in white coats*

A Brief History of the GBI

Jill Whitehead

This year is a turning point for the GBI. We are going online. A new venture for the group and one that was probably never considered when the group was formed 30 odd years ago; in fact the word computer was not in many people's vocabulary. As it is a step forward, I wondered how and when the group was formed and who were the "ring leaders"? I'm rather an inquisitive person so out came the old newsletters and a good bit of bedtime reading followed.



The SS&J as it was first named, *The Siberian, Spuria and Japanese Group*, was the brainchild of Alex Back, who, for a while, had been contributing articles for the BIS on sibiricas and spurias. He felt that this group of irises were very under-represented and was keen to encourage members to grow them. One result of these articles is that members started corresponding with him, and the idea of a specialist group started then. As an aside, I have particularly enjoyed his spuria article in the 1975 *Year Book*. However, in June 1976, a group of twelve BIS members met at the RHS New Hall, London. Jennifer Hewitt was one of this group and she remembers Alex's glow of pleasure throughout the meeting. Before the meeting Alex had prepared the first newsletter, encouraging everyone to contribute. After a welcoming speech by Ivor Knowles, the President of the BIS, it was down to business, down to the nitty gritty of who was going to do what! Jennifer was chosen as Chairman; she maintains it was not because of her expertise but because she had fewer excuses than anybody else. Doris Hansford became the treasurer, another keen hybridiser and author of several articles. Alex was really the fountainhead of the group, hence he was chosen for secretary. He had all the contacts through his letter writing and the sharing of plants. Alex had joined the BIS in 1961 and soon afterwards entered his first show. Not all went to plan though, as apparently he had tied his box of carefully prepared irises onto his roof rack but unfortunately when he arrived at the show the irises were no more!

Once he retired he really set about growing and breeding many beardless irises. In fact in the National Collection we still have two of his siberians 'Vee One' and 'Valda'. He was one of the leading advocates of these irises but was also rather an expert on species gladioli. It must have been a terrible shock to the group to hear, in August of the same year, that Alex had been knocked down by a car and died in hospital. The group was

immediately thrown into difficulties, not only had they lost a dear friend but also a leader. However, thankfully they decided that the best memorial to him was to continue to try to develop his hopes for the success of the group. Enter Joan Trevithick, who volunteered to become the editor, it was her kind offer that was the turning point of the group and she soon became the linchpin. Joan continued as editor for the next 17 years until she finally lost her battle with cancer in July 1994. It must be recognized that without Joan's efforts and enthusiasm the group probably would have folded. It was Joan's friendly style, her way of making everybody feel important, from beginner to expert, that comes across in these early newsletters. Joan also took on Doris's role of secretary and treasurer, when Doris, who had recently remarried, felt that she could no longer devote the time to the group. Joan had great vision and energy and somehow even managed to get her son David involved. He became seed officer and treasurer for a while but I gather that he was really the one who did the running about, the posting, the checking etc. The term *gofer* springs to mind, much maligned but often the most important job! David also designed the new front cover, which was in use from 1985 onwards, a design that was much appreciated by its members.

The 80s provided a time for the group to grow in both membership and expertise. It was a time of steady and interesting articles in the newsletters, with contributions from Currier McEwen, Jennifer Hewitt, Ben Hager, Tomas Tamberg and Anne Blanco White. Anne joined the group in 1980 and after finishing her three years as BIS President, she joined the committee. She was always very supportive, happy to contribute in so many ways and an invaluable member then and now. Adrian Whittaker was the spuria specialist and contributed some very informative and practical articles and was later to become Chairman. In June 1987 the group had a Meeting for members, or AGM, which was the first time the group had met since the inaugural meeting. It was held at the RHS Halls with the BIS show and welcomed Frances Love and Paul Richardson from New Zealand. Frances and Paul were both contributors to the newsletters and Frances bred 'Emma Ripeka', winner of the first New Zealand Dykes Medal in 1994.

1990 saw two important changes to the Group. Currier McEwen became the first Honorary Life member for his constant support and encouragement of the group from the very beginning. He had written an article for the first newsletter and had kindly donated a copy of his book *The Siberian Iris* to the library which provided many excerpts in the newsletters. Secondly, PCIs and water irises were added to the group remit to reflect the group's ever widening interests. Articles on PCIs from Nora Scopes, Bob Wise and Joe Ghio were then included in the newsletters. It seems that Nora was inspired after seeing the garden of Marjorie Brummitt who encouraged her to breed PCIs. She was initially attracted to reds but was always on the look-out for a long succession of bloom. 'Peacock Pavane', registered in 1993,

is still one of my favourites. Joe Ghio starting growing them in the '60s after being at an iris show when he was asked if he wanted some native iris seed. More to be polite than anything he agreed and it was later that year, rather as an afterthought, that he sowed them in coffee cans! He was surprised when they germinated like grass but what to do, he wasn't prepared to waste valuable garden space on them so planted them on the shady side of his patio, simply planting the entire contents of the can in the ground without separating them, to quote "When Spring arrived I was astonished by the bloom!" He used some of Marjorie Brummitt's plants because of her pure colours. Now Joe's seed is highly sought after and it is his seed that we have used, either directly or indirectly, in our latest seedlings. (See the CD for some of this year's results).

The BIS gave Joan the Pilkington Award in 1991. However, in typical Joan style, she thanked the BIS but insisted that the SS&J worked as a team of which she was very happy to be part.

In 1992 there was another change, this time in the printing, to quote Joan, "away with the dreaded stencils" and the newsletter took on a much smarter look but I miss seeing those old lines of typing. It is easy to forget, in these days of the computer, what it was like to type using stencils and how you could type a whole page without a mistake, until the last linepatience was certainly a virtue then.

When Joan died in 1994, it soon became obvious that she had been a central pillar to the group and had given endless hours to further its aims. After Alex's death it was Joan who provided the focus, the mainspring and now the group was to face another challenge. The work that she had done and the friendships she had made were almost impossible to follow. There were obviously many tributes paid but the one I liked best was contributed by Shirley Ryder "I always thought of her as Joan Terrific". However, it was Anne that started rallying the troops and in her unflappable style, with the able help of several stalwarts including Jennifer and Philip Allery, the group began to move forward. Philip had joined in 1984 and had already made valuable contributions as West & Midlands representative. He now took on the role of Treasurer and Membership Secretary. Adrian Whittaker's valuable contribution also saw the group through a sticky patch. He was Chairman at this time and had given Joan tremendous help and support. Sue Pierce volunteered to tackle the editor's role as a gesture of respect for Joan and a role that she continued until 1999. Although she has always maintained that she is not an expert at growing irises or at being an editor, she, however, brought her own style and determination to move the group forward.

A change of name came about in 1996 from the SS&J to the Group for Beardless Irises which certainly reflected the wider interests of the group. Anne, as Secretary, had asked for suggestions for a new name from the

members, some of which I found intriguing like *The Pot of Gold Group* or *The Allsorts Iris Group*. When Sue retired from being editor the group faced another challenging period. No new editor came forward so Philip offered his services and Norma Harris took over as Membership Secretary.

In 2000 the Group made Hilda Goodwin an Honorary member. She was a founder member giving great support to both Alex and Joan and had been Vice Chairman since 1984 and Chairman before that. Unfortunately Hilda didn't have long to enjoy this honour as she died in 2001 shortly before her 95th birthday. In 2002 the iris world lost one of its greatest stalwarts, Currier McEwen who died at the age of 101. Winner of five Morgan-Wood awards and five Payne awards, he was the author of two prestigious publications and countless articles. The GBI had presented him with a crystal cut-glass bowl in 1998. Jennifer wrote a moving tribute to him for all the help and encouragement he had given over the years.

Gradually, although Philip was as enthusiastic as ever, his health began to deteriorate and he found it very difficult to produce the newsletters. Alun Whitehead took over as Treasurer and Membership Secretary to try to ease Philip's load. Philip's unflinching support to the group has to be admired but the job of Editor was causing him great concern. So it became obvious that a new Editor was needed. Again in steps Anne, always there at each crisis point ready to chivvy us along but this time with a rather desperate plea that we needed a new Editor or else shut up shop. Another volunteer rode to the group's rescue, though not on a white horse! Brita Carson. Brita volunteered because she didn't want to see the group fold. Fortunately she had previous editorial experience editing the HPS Scottish Group's *Northern Leaves* publication for a number of years, being also a knowledgeable gardener and a keen beardless iris grower. Anne continued as Secretary, a post she had held since Joan's death and she certainly had held the group's hand in more ways than one! Alun continued as Treasurer and Membership Secretary but it was Brita who brought with her a breath of fresh Scottish air. She completely changed the format of the newsletter to become *The Review*, an A5 publication with colour, and she reinstated a Spring newsletter just to keep us all in touch. For the first few years Alun and I printed both on our home printer to keep the cost reasonable and allowed the subs to remain at a sensible level. Alun also had the idea of a CD to accompany *The Review*, another "little" job to give members the chance to see even more iris!

It must be realised and acknowledged that all the above would not have been possible without the help of a number of members. It would be wrong to single out any one person but we must mention both Anne and Jennifer; Anne for always being there with her characteristic responses,

short but always succinct and Jennifer, a founder member, the group's first Chairman, Librarian in the early days, valued proof reader, author and now the leading British authority on Siberians. Then of course there are the various Chairmen who have added their contributions as ambassadors for the group. I have said the first was Jennifer, then came Max Davis, Hilda Goodwin and in 1984 Jack Venner. He continued until his death in 1989. Jack had a profound knowledge of the genus *Iris* and was happy to share in his own modest way. Cy Bartlett wrote in his obituary that he was a major importer of modern cultivars and had started to distribute modern Japanese iris cultivars of American breeding. Adrian Whittaker then followed with his interest in spurias, not only in growing them but also promoting them and the group to a wider audience. The reins were then taken up by Ray Bomford, a rather idiosyncratic chairman, a keen traveller who encouraged us to sow seeds and who had a great knowledge of and interest in Rhododendrons. Today we are lucky to have Anne Blanco White.

At the 1987 meeting or AGM, Jack said the group was now entering a third stage. So, what stage are we at now, surely a new era, one that is opening the horizons, one that is very exciting, although for non computer buffs like myself a little daunting. It is a new venture hopefully reaching more people who may become interested in growing beardless irises. These were the original aims that Alex had for the group:

1. Communication between members in Great Britain and overseas.
2. A means of exchanging ideas, plants and seeds etc.
3. To assist beginners in growing irises and to offer help with problems.
4. To report on hybridisation.

These aims are still the same today and we owe Alex a great deal.

Iris tridentata

Anne Blanco White

This way-out member of Series Tripetalae is not much grown in this country. It is a cousin of the various forms known as setosas which mainly grow at the northernmost limits of herbaceous activity. This one prefers to stay well south in the warmth of Florida, Tennessee or the Carolinas in the USA where it inhabits boggy ground. It has a long-standing reputation of being hopelessly tender in this country.

Well, global warming may have something to do with the performance of my plant, but this has been an entertaining year. I was given a piece about a decade ago and for one reason or another we have never managed to see eye to eye. For several years it just about survived. As

it happened, when looking for a slide of a different plant, I came across one from about five years ago which showed this plant doing its level best to get out of its flower pot as if it was a Louisiana. I do recall rounding up the escapees and repotting them, but by the time I reached here I was back to one miserable growing point again.

This spring it suddenly produced a small collection of subsidiary growths close to the original and, as the pot was rather small, I potted it on. It grew upwards and by May the offsets were changing their habits and spreading outwards. As they grew taller, the lowest segment of the stems acquired a curve and gradually it grew parallel with the soil surface while the apex continued to extend upwards. There are now some half dozen of these runners and while some were semi-subterranean from early on the remainder were clear of the soil until mid-August when they decided to root themselves while remaining on the soil surface. It is interesting in that its behaviour is similar to both a Louisiana and *Iris prismatica* – both plants that may have to fight their way out of riverine deposits.

Back in June it decided that the original point should flower. Interestingly it seems to have a taste for thunderstorms. We go in for modestly fancy ones here and a local performance produced a sudden acceleration in growth. So first there was a spike, then a flower bud and finally a flower opened – all in slow motion. It was a gorgeous blue. Now the Tripetalae are noted for their minimal standards, but this plant is notable for its non-existent standards. Sadly too it seemed to have non-existent pollen so there were no seeds. Nearly a month later there was a second flower, but it was wrecked by icy thunder showers and never opened at all.

The problem now is just what I do about the top of that pot. My guess is that under normal conditions the plant would expect spring floods to bring a deposit of silt to cover the new rhizomes so I should simply mulch the plant in late winter or possibly late autumn as protection from winter cold. I do keep it under cover through the winter so that it is protected from the cold rains, but once the risk of frost is over it comes out into the garden where the heat in summer can easily reach 40°C after midday.

See photographs of I. tridentata on the inside back cover.

Here in the Southeast the various weather patterns over the year have resulted in the loss of many beardless iris, both mature plants and seedlings. Last winter many large pots of Siberians and PCIs became waterlogged and rotted away by the spring. They did not like the continuous mix of rain, low temperatures, snow and frost. The pots were not standing in shallow watering trays as they do in the summer but were just on hard surfaces, but still they succumbed. The survivors were the ensatas, Louisianas and species crosses. Even the LAs that **were** left (unintentionally) in the allotment water bed came through unscathed, so why did they survive in an exposed position in standing water and the Siberians and PCIs in a more sheltered location did not?

Seedling germination, particularly of the beardededs, was very spasmodic in the spring. In an effort to be more sensible about how many seedlings I could deal with in any one season only half the crop of seed was sown last autumn. Why then, with all this weathering, did they come up in ones and twos? Had they rotted as well? Apparently not, because the rest of the pot decided to germinate in late summer and autumn and I now have a mix of small seedlings along with one or two giants in the same pot to get through the winter. Why did they do that I wonder? The Siberian seedlings either came up like mustard and cress or did not germinate at all. I have a rather interesting yellow Siberian seedling which flowers for a long period but hardly ever sets seed, either from attempted crosses or bee pods. I suspect it is not very fertile; hence the long flowering period. Last year there were 3 bee pods and I planted all the seed, but not a single seedling appeared; so it is obviously not producing viable seed either. Does this happen with other cultivars as it seems unusual for a Siberian not to produce plenty of fertile seed?

The next task was to get the largest seedlings into the ground. By the time the beds were ready for planting and I had returned from various holiday trips, not the least of which was to see the Tamberg's irises in Germany, the weeds were abundant and the weather had changed. By late July the soil had completely dried out; the days were hot and sunny with a continual warm desiccating wind. I felt I must get these youngsters planted to give them a chance to develop decent root systems before the winter. Trying to keep the seedlings going was extremely difficult as I was watering by hand and the wind blew the water where it wanted to, rather than where I was trying to put it. Some seedlings survived until rain arrived in early autumn, but many were lost. I have now invested in a better watering system i.e. a hose.

Not so long ago, Hiroshi Shimizu sent some of his pseudata seedlings

to Anne Blanco White to distribute to members of the BIS so that they could be grown on, possibly for trial. I was given a few of these and carefully potted them up for observation. Imagine my horror when they threw up this really chlorotic-looking foliage. Was I to be responsible for their demise? They were repotted in a mix that contained more ericaceous compost. The following spring the new foliage was just as chlorotic. I have realised since, much to my relief, that this is characteristic of many of the species crosses, not just the pseudatas. Whether they are growing in my neutral garden soil, in an ericaceous mix in pots, or in the wetland trial beds at Wisley they always produce this pale yellow, even white, foliage in the spring. By late summer this has turned into a normal green. The trouble is, if the plants are in a sunny position, the pale leaves start to scorch and look unsightly. This is avoided by keeping them in the shade, but will they flower well in such a position?

A question still to be answered.

Two Days with The Tambergs

Iris Clarke

It was funny how this trip came about. I had originally put an advert in the Kent Group *Facets* booklet advertising for someone to accompany me to an AIS convention in Austin, Texas. I had been to a few before and I had always enjoyed them. I had no offers. I mentioned it to Olga Wells who promptly answered that she would rather go to visit the Tambergs at Siberian time, if at all possible. So what with the credit crunch and carbon footprints flying around at the time it seemed like a better idea. As it happened I had recently ordered some of Tomas' Siberians, and was eagerly waiting for their arrival. I emailed him and asked if it would be possible for Olga and me to come across for a few days at Siberian time to visit his garden. I had a reply straight away saying he would be delighted for us to visit. So flights were booked and hotel reservations made for the second week in June. But as time went on our spring got warmer and my Siberians were going over. Tomas emailed me and said they had had an early spring and couldn't guarantee many blooms. I consoled myself with the fact that there were always his daylilies.

Anyway we were not disappointed but greatly impressed by what we saw and where we went. Tomas and his lovely wife Tina were excellent hosts and looked after us for two whole days, driving us around in a very old car which had done over 100,000 miles and which was due to be replaced at the end of the week. But it went like a bomb and stood up to the long mileage we covered over the two days. The first day Tomas arrived at our hotel in Potsdam and drove us to his house in a leafy suburb of Berlin

where we had a lovely time viewing his garden. Luckily, there were still lots of Siberian irises blooming, along with many other herbaceous and perennial plants. Climbing roses covered the fences and a particularly old variety called 'Ghislain de Féligonde' sprawled about making a lovely show. Hostas and *Dactylorhiza fuchsii*, the wild orchid, which seemed taller and richer in colour than the usual ones, had self seeded around. I was taken by some tall *Allium giganteum* in a dark purple plum colour, apparently a chance seedling which a friend had given him. There were some beautiful Acers grown from seed years ago.

He also had what looked like a glassed-in veranda on the second floor of the house. We went up to look and discovered that what had once been a balcony was now enclosed and used to store his tender plants and seedlings and also used to dry walnuts.

After a very nice lunch which Tina had prepared for us, we continued our journey to visit their allotment where the main bulk of Tomas' irises are grown. When we got to this place we seemed to be in the countryside. We parked by a long high wall with a high wooden gate so we couldn't see anything on the other side until we went inside. Tina proceeded to unlock the door with a large key, and stepped aside so we could enter first. We were staggered by the sight that met our eyes. Not irises, but a huge bed of poppies greeting us with all their beauty and colour. There was a mixture of single and double varieties in an array of pinks, reds, salmons and whites. I have always liked poppies, now I love them. At the end of the visit Tomas picked a bunch for us and we watched them gradually unfold over the next few days, in a bottle of water in our hotel bedroom.

You could hardly call this field of flowers an allotment, not by English standards anyway. It was very large with rows and rows of Tomas' beloved irises; some had gone over but others were still flowering supremely. I forgot to take note of the names of them all. There was one particular iris which I believe he is dedicating to the memory of Ray Jeffs which I think he is naming 'Sun Ray'.

And there was more than just irises in this allotment. Tall *Eremurus* were growing around the edges. There were also his many special *Hemerocallis* beds, some were in flower and some were not ready, but they were all looking very green and healthy. Tomas picked a lovely amber one for us to hold while we were going round. It was exquisite. The flower was quite large in an amber shade with crinkly edges. I'm now converted to daylilies too. There were also lots of soft fruit bushes and strawberry plants which Tina was very happily picking from while we went round. Tina had a lovely hosta collection which she had proudly grown in a very dark area under trees. Tomas had teased her that nothing would grow there in such bad light. Tina proved him wrong. They were marvellous. Soon Tina called us for tea and we sat together in the sun on a small terrace surrounded by

poppies enjoying cake and strawberries. A lovely end to a perfect day. We did not go back empty handed. Apart from the bunch of poppies, Tomas uprooted some poppy seedlings from his compost heap. They were small then but are now growing in one of my daughters' gardens and are huge. Tina dug up some strawberry runners which were potted up when I got home and they are growing well too. They are a dark sweet variety called 'Mieze Schindler'.

The following day was equally exciting. Tomas and Tina came for us at 10 o'clock as planned and drove us to the Sanssouci Palace, near our hotel, which was once the summer residence of *Frederick the Great* and built, 1745-47, in the Rococo style. We went into the palace for a guided tour with the help of earphones, and very impressive it was too. Olga and I went back another time to visit the garden and surrounding area. After lunch we drove to the wonderful garden and nursery of Karl Foerster, the German nurseryman, plant breeder and writer. This garden had been created by him in 1912 and is now managed and looked after by his daughter, Marianne, who was busy with her staff moving a "rockery". The garden is now part of the UNESCO World Heritage Site. I thoroughly recommend this garden to anyone in the area. It is open every day all year round. The sunken garden was especially lovely with a pond in the middle, surrounded by trees, with all the usual spring and early summer flowers. There was a path all the way round so one could look down into the sunken garden, making many beautiful vistas. We naturally had to visit the nursery and came away with far too many plants.

We then travelled on to a private garden which seemed miles away, to a garden owned by Marie Anne Ludke, who told us she gardened from dawn to dusk with short breaks for refreshment. It showed. Her garden was full of colour with plants in every direction. We didn't know what to look at first. It was large and sloped down to a shingle path along the centre and wide borders either side. There was a wide pond with waterfalls at the bottom surrounded by more beds with obelisks and rusty supports covered in clematis and roses. Peonies, poppies, campanulas and many other exotic plants were all jostling for attention. This lady also had another plot beyond her garden which contained mainly Siberian irises. She was also contemplating buying some more land to continue her love of gardening and plants. She will no doubt be gardening by torchlight. After yet more tea and cakes in a shady part of the garden we finally had to leave this inspiring garden and its owner. We'd had a lovely time and came away with lots of new ideas.

We had two marvellous days with Tomas and Tina and I can't thank them enough for the wonderful experience of visiting their garden.

See photographs of the visit on the CD.

The Louisiana Challenge

Mark Haslett

Since taking up the challenge of growing these irises I have been researching the plants' natural habitat in Louisiana and the surrounding areas and comparing growing methods from other growers here in the UK and around the world. This has led me to try a number of experiments in order to see if I can get these plants to flower well and I will keep the group informed of my results.

LAs require a lot of water and if they don't get enough the plant will go into a semi dormant state. Given the ideal conditions they will grow rapidly and out-grow their containers or growing areas very quickly.

My first experiment was to look at the plant's water requirements. I decided to try what I referred to as "bucket culture", this was simply LAs grown in buckets with a waterlogged soil mix at various water depths so they would act as mini pools. I also grew other test plants of the same cultivar in the soil mix that Jane Cole used before she died.

Other trial plants were grown in balconnières and on the tray system so that some plants had their feet constantly wet. The results were interesting. I found the plants in the buckets produced larger flowers than those in the balconnières and plants grown in the water trays flowered with a very good flower size.

I used rainwater or RO* water to water the containers and to top up the buckets, this way the plants only get natural water or a purified form of tap water. I will continue with the experiment next year as I'm installing some new pools and mini bogs over the winter and I am experimenting with soil mixes to see if this makes as big a difference as I understand from overseas growers. They also suggest that flower colour and size can be affected by water pH and temperature. I would be interested to hear from other growers about the cultivars they grow and the methods they use.



Self watering Balconnière showing the roots continually damp but not perhaps wet enough for LAs.

*RO water is Reverse Osmosis water which is purified and is used for fish which are sensitive to the minerals and chemicals in our tap water.

Louisiana Facts

Ron Killingsworth

No one knows for sure how long the LA iris has been growing in the damp, marshy or swampy areas of south Louisiana. Certainly the Native Americans living in that area would have noticed the huge fields of this iris blooming in the bayous in April and May each year. Early European explorers probably noticed this magnificent flower in its native habitat but it did not impress them enough to make notes of their sightings. We do know for a fact that in the early 1900s the iris was noticed by many of the people living in south Louisiana and they began to go into the marshes, swamps and bayous during April and collect different colours of this iris to transplant to their gardens around their homes.

Thanks to the efforts of many within the iris- loving people of south Louisiana this wild flower was saved from destruction. Through the years the native habitat of the LA iris has continually been reduced through man-made changes and through climate changes. Although there remain small areas in which the LA iris still grows in the wild, the huge natural fields of this iris have all but disappeared.

LA irises are grown the world over. Several of the major hybridisers of LA irises reside in Australia and New Zealand. They are grown from Maine to Washington, from Florida to California, and all states in-between. They certainly grow exceptionally well in their native state of Louisiana.

LA irises are water-loving irises. If you have a naturally wet area in your garden or a pond on your property, then you should certainly be growing LA irises but they can also be grown in dug beds, in raised beds or in pots. They love water and it is impossible to overwater a LA iris!

There are currently about 2,600 registered hybrids. LA irises, when properly fed and watered, will provide an abundant increase which you can then share with your gardening friends.

If you are serious about growing and preserving this native plant of Louisiana, you might want to join the Society for Louisiana Iris (SLI), a non-profit organisation consisting of LA iris lovers dedicated to the future development and preservation of this beautiful flower. The Society publishes a beautiful quarterly newsletter, the *Fleur de Lis*. Membership information can also be obtained at the web site (www.louisianas.org), the web site for the American Iris Society (www.irises.org) or by writing to the SLI treasurer, Bobbie Ann Hutchins, at 10319 Caddo Lake Rd, Mooringsport, LA 71060.

LA irises can be obtained through many mail order outlets. A visit to the official site of the Society for Louisiana Irises will provide you with much more information on growing and obtaining LA irises.

'Clara Ellen' – Spurias a bit on the dry side?

Alun Whitehead

All irises have either rhizomes or bulbs as a device by which they can survive in periods of drought when leaves become a liability rather than a useful asset. In which case, why is the advice often given not to let spuria rhizomes dry out before planting? Perhaps the following may help add to the debate.

A few years ago we purchased a spuria at the BIS AGM in Surrey with the good intention of planting it immediately when we got home, but as usual events got in the way. It was a few weeks later that a phone call from a friend about spuria cultivation jogged the memory. A rush to the barn revealed it to be a completely dried out rhizome of 'Clara Ellen'. Well was there much point in planting it? It didn't sound very hopeful, but a rhizome can surely cope with a dry spell, so planted it was. In the spring new leaves emerged and I am very glad that they did. Not only is the flower of 'Clara Ellen' a stunning purple and yellow contrast, but the memory of having received this from the now late Ellis Carpenter made it special.

So is there anything in the old advice about planting spuria rhizomes when they are fresh? Like many things, this goes back directly to Dykes.

Although the rhizomes are often an inch or more in diameter, their substance is rather more fibrous than fleshy, and consequently, when out of the ground, they will not long resist drought. This makes the transference of plants over any great distance a matter of some difficulty, for it is almost impossible to ensure moisture and exclude decay during a journey lasting several weeks. I have repeatedly failed to revive rhizomes of various members of the spuria group which I have received from Asia in an absolutely dry condition, although rhizomes of Pogon iris have succeeded under identical treatment. This fact should be remembered when transplanting these Irises, and the rhizomes should not be allowed to remain out of the ground for any length of time or to become parched. It also points to the advisability of the use of seeds when it is desired to introduce into cultivation some wild form from the interior of Asia.¹

Intuitively, you can see a distinction between pogons (bearded irises) which survive with their rhizomes exposed on the surface enjoying the sun and the spurias with their rhizomes buried. Dykes was writing in the days of slow land and sea travel. Nowadays with the advent of airmail, do his words still have the same weight? To try and test this, in October 2006 we had a couple of pieces of 'Hickory Leaves' again left in the barn – this time surplus to need – and again dried out. So they were placed in 2 saucers of water to overwinter on the windowsill. They started with no live roots whatsoever, but

soon the new roots emerged from below the buds and leaves grew – you will find the photos on the CD. So again it looks as if desiccation is not insurmountable. However, you should bear in mind that ‘Clara Ellen’ and ‘Hickory Leaves’ are normally good growers – there are a few weaker hybrids about and they may be more problematic. Also leaving the rhizomes in a shady barn will be different from leaving them lying on the surface in sunlight. It was interesting to note that the last spuria trial at Wisley had many losses and the rhizomes there were first planted on the surface just like TBs before the error was spotted! So please take heed of this warning. This article is written more in the spirit of exploring *what we can get away with* rather than *best practice*. So continuing in that theme ...

When you dig up an established clump of spurias, you replant the healthy rhizomes with one or two buds showing. What do you do with the old woody rhizomes from the centre with no signs of life? Well a few years ago, we replanted some old woody pieces of ‘Imperial Bronze’ – about 3 pieces in two holes and I have just recently re-dug them for splitting after enjoying their flowers consistently. Clearly there must have been enough dormant buds waiting to break. All the resulting newer rhizomes dug up looked fine and there was no difference in flowering although they probably took a year off to resettle.

And continuing on the theme, what happens if you neglect to weed? For pogon irises this is likely to spell disaster, what about spurias? Well we have a patch on the nursery we call the allotment for old time’s sake and being furthest away from the house and garden, it is not high on the priority list when we are pushed. The old spuria bed was religiously weeded for the first few years, but over the last two it has frankly been an embarrassment with couch grass and creeping thistle. Could the spurias cope with the competition – well yes easily. The only failure was ‘Redwood Supreme’ which has failed under better circumstances. Whilst the others generally did not increase, they certainly held their own. One noticeable exception was ‘Missouri Autumn Leaves’ which must have the constitution of an ox, because not only did it increase happily despite the weeds, where it was growing was right on the edge of the bed where the clay soil had not been so well prepared. In fact, it was now growing in almost solid clay.

Spurias tend to be Cinderellas which is one of the reasons I like them; a natural wish to support the underdog. Coming late in the season, anyone wishing to buy “an iris” for their garden will have already done so by the time the spurias start flowering. This is a shame, because their architectural stature and their early spring growth provide a different element for the garden. The flowers are a bonus.

¹*The Genus Iris* – William Rickatson Dykes, 1913

Gleanings from the Spuria Society Newsletters.

Madeleine Bullock

These gleanings all come from renowned Spuria Growers.

Spuria Iris Society Winter 1994.

“Some Things I Have Learned About Spurias” B Charles Jenkins,

1. Spurias are usually shorter the first year after planting. They even grow taller as crowding of the clump intensifies.
2. Holding spuria rhizomes in the refrigerator before planting initiates earlier blooming.
3. Seed germination takes place as many as four years after sowing. If one relies on first year germination only, some of the genetic variation of the cross will be missed.
4. Except when making crosses, it is better to cut off spent blooms to promote greater increases and thus more blooms the following year.
5. If crosses are to be made, it is better to cut the falls off before anther dehiscence in order to prevent open pollination or selfing by bees and other insects.
6. I must emphasize what is already known about spurias and that is that they all have individual characteristics. Some do not bloom the first year after planting. I have even seen some that skip every other year while others are very consistent and bloom every year.

Spuria Iris Society Newsletter Spring 1985,

Joan Trevithick, Editor SS&J British Iris Society

1. The period of dormancy can vary very much indeed, of seed sown in March 1984 some came up in September, some are just peeping through after the snow and ice have melted, and I am still waiting for others to appear. I have usually given them two springs before I discard the compost into a frame, only to find, some time later, this seems to give them a boost and up they come.
2. If you have your own seed, sow them straight from the pod as it splits, even if they are beige or pale green in colour. My seeds are bought in, so they are sown around the second week in March, to catch the later frosts.
3. When the seeds begin to germinate they must not be allowed to dry out, so be sure to watch them closely. Keep the seed-compost damp, but not wet. As the seedlings appear, I add a small amount of high phosphate liquid fertiliser to the water and continue to do this as the seedlings grow and others appear.

“What endeared me to Spurias” Pete DeSantis

1. I find that Spurias need less attention than bearded iris, have very few diseases and pests, do not have to be dug up and separated every 3 years like bearded iris. They do not like to have their feet in water, so they must

have good drainage. I feed them more often than I feed bearded iris, outside of that, I use the same culture. I do, after the bloom season, cut all the fans to about 3 to 4 inches above the ground and sparsely water them in June and July.

Spuria Iris Society Newsletter Winter 1995

“Spuria Iris Culture” Ben Hager

1. Spuria irises will grow well in nearly any type of soil and they will tolerate either alkaline or acid soil conditions. Sandy soil should have ample additions of humus or humus-like fertilisers such as barnyard manures to insure moisture and nourishment retention. Good drainage is absolutely necessary for Spurias. They cannot tolerate soggy soil, or wet feet year around.
2. Spurias are less fragile and less demanding than most other irises. A little attention will result in a wonderful display of beautiful blossoms in the spring

Spuria Iris Society Newsletter Summer 1997

“Who will develop reblooming Spuria Iris?” Clarence Mahan,

Recently, while doing research on a different topic in back issues of SIGNA, I came across an article with the title “Reblooming Garden Strains” in issue No 8, November 1971. Written by Roy Davidson, this article concludes with an intriguing thought. “A strain of remontant spurias could come from *I. autumnalis* Tausch, a plant of *I. halophila* complex designated for its fall blossom. If a reflowering tendency of any plant can be strengthened by cultural practices and multiplied by breeding procedures, a new and valuable race may come about to gladden the days of autumn in the iris garden”. Remembering that a synonym for *I. halophila*, Pallas, is *I. gueldenstadtiana* ... ,”

“Another regular flowerer (in autumn) is a form of the ubiquitous *I. gueldenstadtiana* - an iris which does not get much attention or praise when it flowers in June, for then it is overshadowed by finer forms of the Spuria section. When, however, it sends up its second show of spikes in mid-September, and when each spike has as many as three or four flowers open at once, it is a much more valuable plant.”

One fact is certain, Dykes had a form of Spuria iris that dependably rebloomed in his garden and it was quite floriferous when it rebloomed. Some bright and adventurous hybridiser might even be able to develop a strain of reblooming spurias — Who is it going to be?

A Siberian Mystery

Jennifer Hewitt

The Morgan-Wood Medal is the highest award given each year by the American Iris Society to a Siberian iris — apart from the Dykes Medal for which all types of iris are eligible. Well, pigs quite possibly do fly (in aeroplanes) but taking-off on their own accord seems as likely as the American Dykes going to a beardless iris. Meanwhile, winning the Morgan-Wood Medal is achieved by relatively few Siberians for performing well in various parts of the very diverse states of the USA, and the roll of honour includes names that are familiar to us as being among the best: 'Caesar's Brother', 'White Swirl', 'Ego', 'Silver Edge', 'Ruffled Velvet', 'Coronation Anthem', 'Salamander Crossing', to select just a few.

But there is, to my mind, a surprising omission from the list, and that is 'Harpswell Happiness', bred by Currier McEwen and registered in 1983. This white tetraploid, not very tall (30 inches/76cm), with touches of soft yellow at its heart and greenish veins on the fails, has pleasing form with fairly upright standards and flaring to arching falls, very slightly ruffled. In fact it seems hardly necessary to describe it since I'm sure many members grow it and find it easy, vigorous and rewarding. It qualified easily for the Award of Garden Merit (AGM) in the RHS Trial at Wisley. But what makes it stand out from other whites is that elusive factor, personality. Impossible to describe but very evident when compared with other equally good performers that don't have it.

For reasons I don't understand, white Siberians don't generally have much appeal for me, something I find even harder to account for when remembering that I usually like, often prefer, white forms of other perennials. 'Harpswell Happiness' is the exception and if I had to choose a few Siberians for a desert island it would certainly be amongst them. Moreover, it is a good parent, passing most of its qualities and sometimes its colour to its children.

So why has it never won the Morgan-Wood Medal? Was it unlucky in that another iris did better in the years when it was judged? Was it its colour? To me, other white irises can look harsh so could that have been a factor in judges' decisions? Only two whites, 'White Swirl' and 'Snowcrest' in 1962 and '63 respectively, won the Morgan Award before it was upgraded to Medal status in 1986 and the name of Ira Wood, who did much for the AIS and the Siberian Iris Society, added to that of F Cleveland Morgan, a Canadian founding member of AIS who bred 'Caesar' and 'Caesar's Brother'. And only one white, Steve Varner's 'King of Kings' has won the Medal, in 1990. Registered in 1982, a year before 'Harpswell Happiness', it doesn't have anything like the same appeal for me (and didn't grow as well).

Other and later winners certainly deserve their success, but to me the mystery remains, that 'Harpswell Happiness' is the best iris never to win the Morgan-Wood Medal.

Aulden 2009 – Some Highs and Lows.

Alun Whitehead

I don't usually like to write about a year as any such snippets can only really just scratch the surface, but as 2009 marked an important change for us, I thought it was worth an exception. For the last few years we had entered a particular routine of plant fairs and selling. The largest show we did was the Malvern Spring which was always enjoyable to do, but very tiring. There would be 2 weeks preparing plants, 4 days selling and 1 week putting the plants and the props back. During this time the garden had to fend for itself. More importantly, last year I missed all the PCIs flowering. Things had to change! So whilst missing the many friends we made at Malvern and elsewhere, this was the first year we could concentrate on those things which time hadn't allowed.

Our year started with a trip to East Anglia in March. Our principal interest was to hear Sarah Cook speak enthusiastically to a local group of the NCCPG about her Cedric Morris iris collection. It also gave us a chance to see several nurseries; Anglesey Abbey (too late for the snowdrops but it satisfied our curiosity) and a chance to look around Cambridge Botanic Garden with its strong Dykes connection. We enjoyed the colourful winter garden of the latter with its tapestry of foliage and flowers, including an assortment of *Ii. unguicularis* and *lazica*. The alpine house was also a treat at that time of year with its array of pristine jewels.

As you can imagine from the earlier remarks, the next highlight was the enjoyment of the PCIs. I do not disturb them during the frosty weather, but in early April I repotted them into larger pots and I think this helped the flowering. You will see some of the seedlings on the CD. I was surprised that some sown in March 2008 were already flowering size 13 months from seed which is a big improvement on the usual 3 years for most irises. While not all the seedlings will turn out to be good garden plants, at the moment it is just fun to see the range. With their different patterns and hues, it is hard to find one that would not be an asset in any garden. I had never before considered PCIs as pot plants, but a 4 litre stock plant of 'Blue Bossa' was moved to a container by a bench and its succession of flowers kept it there for almost 4 weeks. We will try that again.

With the PCI season drawing to a close and having not managed to see any irises in other gardens, something had to be done. A day trip to Knightshayes and another nursery sufficed. At Knightshayes we were amply rewarded. A beautiful natural-looking woodland garden clearly planted by a plantsman. We were too late for the early spring gems, but the PCIs were still in flower (please see the CD for a taste). They are growing there in a thin canopy of trees and shrubs and were enjoying themselves. There were many other things to see at Knightshayes, such as the more formal areas and an enormous Kitchen garden, so we will be back.

Another group of irises that had suffered from our time pressures was the Siberians. We knew that if we wanted to concentrate on the National Collection that we would have to make time. This was the first year for the plants from Kim to flower and we were very pleased when Jennifer Hewitt came with a collection of slides and we could do some checking. 'Soft Blue', a good grower, also popped up with an 'Emma Ripeka' label but luckily we could replace it from a plant we had bought years ago. 'Tycoon' turned up with various labels, which was funny as we had thought that it hadn't survived the last collection. In fact we had purchased a plant from a UK nursery on that assumption but the plant we purchased was wrongly named! It can be fun or frustrating depending on your mood. One thing I was impressed about was the easy way Jennifer's slides allowed you to compare colour. It was simple to hold a slide against a flower and compare. Her Provia film provided a good colour balance. Colour has been a recurring theme throughout the year, and no doubt will be for some time to come. Getting a reasonable representation can be difficult or impossible. It is very easy to take digital pictures but that violet-blue range is still problematic. We had a professional photographer working here for a few days and she agreed there is no easy solution. We know that from talking to garden clubs, there are keen amateur photographers still using old fashioned film, so there must be a reason!

I must thank Jeff Dunlop for providing a real highpoint to the year. He kindly sent cultivars raised by himself and Dean Cole in late 2007. Last year they were settling in, but this year they were the bee's knees. 'Dear Currier' was very noticeable because of the colour contrast, the pale light sky blue style arms and the slightly darker standards offset by the dark falls. On closer inspection, the falls are actually a good deep violet blue with almost black veins which gives the overall effect. The gold in the signal enhances it. 'Dear Currier' was named in honour of Currier McEwen to celebrate his 100th birthday – so it had to be special. All of the cultivars Jeff sent were good. There was a photo of 'Grape Truffle' on last year's CD which again is a difficult colour to capture well with the digital camera. 'My First Kiss' is a combination of violet-pink with areas suffused with blue. Look at the detailing on 'Thinking of You' (on the CD) to see how far we have moved from 'Butter and Sugar'. In some ways, it does remind me of the latter being shorter than the normal Siberian. We use 'Butter and Sugar' as an edging plant for this reason and 'Thinking of You' looks a very suitable candidate for the same treatment. Surprisingly, a plant of the group that literally stood head and shoulders above the rest was only given a seedling number (02-45-14T) by Dean Cole. If it is not being named, I would love to know its faults because it is certainly an imposing plant and could happily set off a border. If you are hoping to acquire any of these cultivars, they are not in the usual nurseries yet but they are currently stocked by Fieldstone Gardens in Maine (www.fieldstonegardens.com), a

general hardy plant nursery. However, don't forget our seedlist where Jeff has been a regular contributor. We will certainly be sowing some of his seed again this year.

Hopes and aspirations! Well thankfully we all have them. For our next trip we decided on a foray into times past. In the 1980s, the late Harry Foster had envisaged a Welsh Showcase for irises near where he lived at Crickhowell. That is not far away from us, so when the country hotel at Gliffaes had its charity open day, we went to see the type of setting proposed and of course, were there any old irises around? Harry named quite a few Siberians before his sudden death and so for us it was more than academic interest. Unfortunately we were disappointed. There were a few modern Tall Bearded irises on their patio but no Siberian irises could be found. However, the setting was idyllic in its acres of grounds on a hillside overlooking the babbling river Usk. We could easily understand why the 'Welsh Weekend' held by the BIS in those days had been so well received.

The weather had been glorious at Gliffaes and after such an enjoyable time, it was natural for our luck to change. First it was the sun. Just before the BIS Summer Show and the hottest weekend of the year our bore pump stopped working. It's Friday afternoon, the show is the following day. What to do? Go to the show or stay to try and fix it? Luckily we had half a tank of water – about one day's requirement. As everything was likely to be closed at the weekend (to get spare parts etc) we took the gamble and went to the show. On Sunday it was the unpleasant job of hauling up the weighty pump from all of its 30 metres. A trial run on the surface showed no movement. A replacement was promptly ordered and we managed to find one for delivery on the Tuesday. We were watering just enough to stop the plants being completely distressed but less than they would have liked. We were just so grateful when the water started flowing again – it could have been worse.

Of course once we could water again, we didn't need to for almost the rest of the summer. Rain means weed germination and so for rest of the summer, my lasting memory is weeding. At Portmeirion there is a statue to the glorious summer of '76. I was thinking something similar to the absent summer of '09. However, there must have been some let-up as there are photos of spurias for the CD and our stock of daylily photos has increased. The rain actually helped the colour on the daylilies – it was remarkable.

The year ended on a mixed note. The future of the Wisley trials is giving concern with the rationalisation that has been going on there. A hastily arranged "workshop" at Wisley sounded more positive. Clearly a bigger reward can be obtained for all the efforts and resources put in by all sides and hopefully a happy way forward will emerge. On the positive side we received full national status recognition for the Siberian Collection and now have an official board to put up, but where

SPCNI

Brita Carson

SPCNI is the American Society for Pacific Coast Native Iris (PCNs or PCIs). Debby Cole is their President and Kathleen Sayce has just taken on the job of Treasurer/Secretary. The good news is that you can now become **an online member for \$5.00 annual subscription**. You will then receive an Almanac of the SPCNI in Spring and one in the Fall by email. Please email Debby at dcthree@juno.com with your request to join.

I have made a similar request to the various other Iris Groups to receive membership online at a reduced rate so that I don't pay for postage. So far the SPCNI is the only group to take up my suggestion which is a pity because being editor I need to keep up to date with all Iris Groups and it becomes expensive for me. I still love to read a hard copy, and probably always will, but it makes economic sense to receive publications online.

In the spring of 2009, Debby Cole emailed a few European members of the SPCNI to ask how we grew our PCNs. Anja and Liselotte are both happy to share their experiences of their struggles with these irises. These email replies were sent a year ago but still seem very appropriate this year.

“Hi Debby,

I am sorry, I am new to growing PCI irises and therefore I cannot say which ones grow best for me in my zone 6 garden.

Last year I bought some named cultivars from the USA in spring and fall. Most of the PCIs I bought in Spring died but all of the ones from the Fall have survived so far. So I guess Fall might be the better time to transplant them. As we had a very early and heavy freeze in Fall 2008 I planted the PCIs in pots and put the pots in a protected place. Our winter 2008/2009 is the coldest winter for many decades, with only a little snow cover, temperature - 20°C or - 4°F so I am happy I did not plant them in the garden.

At the moment I am waiting for the seeds I ordered in the seed exchange. In the next few years I will report how the seedlings grow for me. I would like to know what the other European members report.

Thank you and a happy new year,
Anja Pansin from a small town, Geislingen, 60 kilometres south of Stuttgart, South West Germany.”

“Hi Debby

Sorry, I was out of town for a couple of days, then I was catching up and dealing with the perpetual ice and snow this winter.

Anja I am delighted to hear there are Europeans attempting to grow PCNs! Good luck, and please don't give up too soon. It is a little

like a lottery. Yes we live in Switzerland, just about 35 min. drive from the shores of Lake Geneva (lac Lemman) and Montreux, but a totally different climate. We are at 1300m in the mountains. People come here to ski, not to grow a garden.

My obsession began with pictures of some hybrid PCNs in a NARGS bulletin (1990 I think?). I just had to try and joined SPCNI in order to be able to get seeds. Some seeds took their time to germinate, others just did not germinate at all. The few seedlings that survived were planted out in areas that I thought would be ideal, paying attention to what I had read on the subject. Starting seeds every year, I was beginning to lose interest because wildlife, especially the birds had made a total mess of my labels, pulling them out of the ground and dropping them anywhere. But then the first iris bloomed, it obviously was a hybrid, yellow with maroon markings and wide ruffled falls. Soon I was reading about Dr Tomas Tamberg's work with interspecies. I had been playing with *Iris sibirica* pollen for several years and was very fond of the 40 chromosome Sino-sibiricas. However they did not live long here. For several years all I did was crossing PCNs with Sino-sibs and reverse, hoping to get some easy to grow irises. It did not take too long to realise, that PCNs once established did much better than the Sino-sibs or the few Calsibes, provided they were grown in a special microclimate. In this case, on a south facing bank under old larch trees where the plants had practically full sun for part of the day. The acid mulch of the larch is ideal and in the summer the ground is very dry under these trees. In the winter we have good snow cover. Yet I have to admit, when the winter sun gets stronger, the snow melts fast on the steep banks and I feel, I have to shovel snow on the PCNs for protection from the freezing at night.

Species and hybrids will do equally well once established. However, in one area I took advantage of my neighbours' old trees. After they had several trees cut down, within 2 years mostly the species grown in that area all died. The soil was simply too wet in the summer, while a few feet away, on a much steeper bank hybrids and species survived. I am still learning....

In the fall of 2003 I ordered PCNs by mail from a nursery on the west coast along with quite a few Japanese irises. The plants were strong and healthy, all survived the first winter and bloomed! The Japanese irises are still with me, but only one PCN iris survived. It is 'Endless' and what a beauty! But I decided to stick with starting them from seed because I am still searching for the perfect time to transplant. That seems to be the biggest challenge now.

Greetings to All.

Liselotte Hirsbrunner, from Switzerland".

Murder in The Monastery

Philip Jones

One of the problems with PCIs is that in the height of summer they do not appear at their best. After flowering in May and early June all life seems to go out of the plants and they look unkempt. While they were still with us the flowers were undoubtedly beautiful and the variety of new hybrid forms from America was astonishing, but too quickly the memory fades as we contemplate the untidy mess we have to put up with from the beginning of July. And it gets worse. Throughout the summer until the beginning of September, as we return from nurseries and flower shows overflowing with “must have” plants and shrubs we have to face the perennial problem of where to put them. This is the time for ruthless decisions, for making space, for clearing out, and the untidy PCIs may well be the first to go.

In 2009 I decided to tackle this problem. I remember reading - and Brita has too, but unfortunately neither of us can remember where - that it is a good idea to give PCIs a short haircut. I cannot remember when this was meant to happen but I have noticed that about four weeks after flowering new foliage starts to appear. However, it does not appear very noticeable among the entangled untidy overgrown mess and can easily be missed. So it seemed like a good idea to experiment.

The PCIs were growing in three long rows in the Monastic vegetable garden. This was their third year and even without the experiment they were due to be divided in the autumn. I was going to give them a couple of weeks after flowering and then select plants to cut back at two week intervals. In the two weeks before the experiment started, I took a number of photographs of the untidiness. It is the untidiness that needed to be examined. It is the untidiness that I think is the main problem with PCIs.

I had to be careful because I had made sixty or seventy crosses in search of my tidy “all the year round” graceful PCIs. So I was waiting for a few days. During this time I was away. Perhaps I should explain that nowadays I am chaplain to a Carmelite Monastery of enclosed nuns at Dysart. This is thirty miles away from the Monastery in Perth but I usually go into Perth a few times a week.

Unfortunately I was on call for the local hospitals and for these few days had to stay put. It was during these few days that a man in vows armed with a strimmer and with memories of having fought in the Korean war entered the vegetable garden and began to strim. He knew what to do with an entangled undergrowth. The irises were cut down to size. They received a number one hair cut.

Not a green leaf to be seen. They'd all been done in, annihilated, cut down in their prime, murdered by a monk with a strimmer. For a brief

moment — actually about forty five minutes — I had the thought that if I could find the strimmer I could do some strimming of my own in the community. However, closer inspection revealed they were still alive – they were just hiding underground for a few weeks.

But my hybridising programme for 2009 had been cut short and my experiment with foliage was no longer to be staggered over several weeks but had been completed in one fell swoop. An interesting result of the new “all in one go” experiment was that one was able to see the new foliage very distinctly - when it eventually appeared. One was able to notice shades of green that reflected the colours of the flowers and the varying narrowness of leaves all of which gets lost when the plants are mixed up with each other. I am now growing the same plants together to form separate clumps.

The irises have been moved. They have a new home now in Dysart in the enclosed Carmel. I feel they are quite safe here. I have not enquired if any of the sisters has a licence for a shotgun.

I have never had problems growing PCIs from seed in the past but when I moved into Dysart last Christmas I seemed to lose the plot. I was a bit short of space but I thought that an unused passage-way at the bottom of a flight of steps near my front door would be ideal for growing PCIs from seed. This was a mistake. Although it looked up to the sky it was too dark and too wet. The seed trays were too shallow and although there was good germination a lot of them damped off. Even after transferring some seedlings into pots they still continued to throw in the towel because I think everything was too wet. However, seed that was planted in a larger and deeper seed tray grew well – rather, one half did. I think there was a slight slope because in the bottom end hardly any seed germinated at all.

I am beginning to realise that the reason there was no problem in the past was probably because there was always good light and good drainage. I am now starting to grow some of the species and I will have to be extra careful. I will be using mushroom boxes which are deeper than the usual seed trays. I think this is important because the very slender roots can be quite long and I want them to be free of the bottom surface. I will be adding plenty of grit and also, I think, plenty of light, fresh air and drainage. In the past I tended to plant seedlings out when they were quite small. Once they are growing in well drained soil with a mulch round them I feel they can weather the storm and the sun. As I say the roots go down quite a long way.

However, leaving nothing to chance I will still try two or three options and see how we get on without fear of the strimmer .

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Photo credits

Back cover is a lovely view at Knightshayes with a simple clump of *I. laevigata* growing with water lilies. View many others on the CD.

Photograph by Alun Whitehead.

Inside back cover showing the growth of *I. tridentata* by Anne Blanco White. See page 12. Photos by Anne Blanco White.

Note the difference in the foliage between April and mid August of pseudata plants. See page 14. Photo by Olga Wells.



Iris tridentata



Pot growth of *I. tridentata*



Pseudata plants in April with chlorotic leaves



And in August with healthy green leaves

