

# The Review



The Group for  
Beardless Irises

Issue No 7 Autumn 2010



Siberian. 'Atlantic Crossing' in bud. © Alun Whitehead

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Front Cover - Spuria 'Eleanor Hill' introduced by Ben Hager in 1979.



## Editor's Notes

### Brita Carson

We have gone from -19°C of snow and ice, to +8°C of flooding and back to -6°C in less than four weeks. How do plants cope with these fluctuations in temperature. All the land around here still belongs to the Church of Scotland. We live in the Old Manse at the top of the hill, and at the bottom of the hill, 200 metres below, is the Church and cemetery circa 1770 built on a slight incline back from the river. During the floods the water was lapping at the front door of the Church for the second time in four years. The river has large, mature oak trees growing along the banks so the river has been there for a long time. If the river was in the habit of flooding would the builders have built the Church there when they own acres of land all around, on much higher ground? Perhaps more water is coming from new sources upstream and it isn't any proof of climate change but it is food for thought.

Time will tell what has survived but as soon as the sap starts to rise in our bones (and the trees too) it is time to get started again. Gardening shouldn't be all work so look for interesting visits to the Shows and enjoy good talks as an added bonus. Throughout the *Review* there are adverts detailing these days and the speakers who are preparing lectures for everyone to enjoy. I can't overemphasise the benefit of going to Shows to see irises at their best and the more members show *their* interest, the more the organisers will be encouraged to make the Shows even better.

One day of special interest to members of the GBI is the GBI Day at Aulden Farm near Leominster. Anne is the compère with Brian Mathew and Sidney Linnegar, two top class speakers with years of experience, ready to entertain us. The Siberian Iris Collection should be in full bloom and looking a picture, but, of course, I'm biased now that I have also been given National Collection status for my Siberians. Food is a special part of the day but I won't mention mouth-watering cakes in case you have embarked on a diet as one of your New Year resolutions.

Other highlights in 2011. Talks on crocuses at Myddelton House, the home of E A Bowles. First Show, talk by Dr Roger Holland on Bowles and his crocuses and at the second Show, Andrew Turvey, on the gardens at Myddelton House. Anne is giving the lecture at the Summer Show at Wisley and to finish the year in style Tomas Tamberg is coming over from Germany to give the new lecture, the Bryan Dodsworth Lecture, at the AGM of the BIS. All these Shows, talks and GBI Day are open to all GBI and BIS members and any friends who might be interested.

A request. If you are taking photographs of your irises, can you set the camera to the highest resolution (best quality). This does reduce the number of photos you can take on the memory card, but then if you transfer them to computer or external hard-drive it will free up space again on your card. We are always looking for good photos for the *Year Book* and CD.

## **Chairman's Report**

### **Anne Blanco White**

Some years start as they mean to go on: 2010 started with unexpected snows, developed a series of improbable heat waves and finally descended into snow again. All I can really say for 2011 is that it may offer an opportunity for an interesting replanting season, but it was surprising what not only survived, but flourished. At all events, it will be of enormous assistance to Brita if you will tell us what has gone and with what it has been replaced. Even the best of Editors cannot be expected to invent *Reviews* and *Newsletters* out of thin air.

In default of a volunteer to take over, Madeleine has nobly carried on with the seed distribution, but would still prefer to hand over to another member. This can be a very entertaining occupation and does lead to a fairly remarkable correspondence on subjects beyond the iris pale. You even learn a lot about the actual seeds too! Would a new Seeds Officer care to step forward, please.

Work on the new digital Iris Picture Library, under the auspices of the BIS, is progressing well. As you might expect the first section to be tackled was nearly all bearded irises. But Alun has put a big collection of Siberians on disk and Jennifer is working hard to make sure that they are true to name. From what I have seen of the bearded, all too many will be incorrectly identified and she has a major task in hand. But when it is all finished you will no longer have any excuses left for misidentifying your plants.

But the main thing to look forward to this year is the Great GBI Meeting. It will be the first time we have had such a gathering for many years and I do hope that most of you will come to Aulden, Leominster and support all the work that Jill and Alun have put into organising it.

Meantime, I send you all my best wishes for the coming year and hope to see some nice new seedlings brought forward on The Day.

### **Carry on Gardening ? Huh.**

Well, I did get rid of a lot of unwanted Siberian seedlings which obligingly flowered after that horrid winter together with several undesirable spurias. The real trouble is that if I find a seedling in the wrong place it tends to get put in a flower bed and, almost by definition, it isn't anything useful. What I do seem to have lost is most of my foetidissimas which I regret, though at the same time the unguics have done well. Anywhere in the garden is liable to come out in a rash of cane evansias and there are still some unidentified plants which simply won't flower.

It was just my luck that my knee packed up early in September which made

it positively dangerous to try and garden. As a result none of the autumn tidying up was done and few of the reticulatas and other replantings were dealt with. Packets of new bulbs simply sat around though I've cleared up a few now. Then I managed to celebrate the holiday season with a mild attack of the fancy form of flu currently in circulation (which I do not recommend). London was thoroughly snowed up, though not as disastrously as some other areas and the disorganised plants look frightful. Some reasonably warm days were useless because I couldn't work for more than about ten minutes at a stretch.

Now, I find myself looking out of the windows and thinking that the only thing to do, if the treatment for my knee is successful, and it may well be, is to have a major blitz and replant the whole place. Shan't dig up poor 'Walter Butt' though – he put on a magnificent show and has gallantly produced a mini-display for the new year. Mind you, there is a batch of seedlings which will have to be planted out, and I knew I would have to make some space for them, but I didn't mean it on this scale. Now, if my friends and colleagues will refrain from finding things for me to do, the garden will benefit.

## **Seed Distribution 2010/2011**

### **Madeleine Bullock**

The GBI Seed List is looking good again this year with contributions from as far afield as USA, Germany and Finland as well as the numerous home grown offerings. Thanks to everyone who contributed and thanks for the little notes I receive with your orders to show that the list is appreciated by those who like to grow irises from seed. The addition of descriptions to most of the hybrids (Jennifer's suggestion and information) to show the colour, and in some cases the size, will help us all to decide what to grow. Publishing the list on the GBI website has brought orders from all over the world, and the setting up of a PayPal account has made payment a lot easier.

A plea to all those members who grow PCIs, Louisianas, species and/or other *Iridaceae*. As a specialist group it would be good to see more diverse seed. Where are seeds from *Iris unguicularis* and *Iris graminea* please. If they don't set seed easily maybe a little human intervention (as Anne has often suggested) with a handy rabbit's tail or sable paint brush (my suggestion might be easier to locate) may be of assistance. While I appreciate that most people like to grow colourful hybrids, there is still room for some understated beauties!

If anyone would like to take over the role of Seed Distribution Officer, I would be pleased to hand over this most pleasurable task to someone with a little more time to spare between Autumn and Spring. In the meantime I shall carry on happily sorting seed and begging for contributions!

## **Group for Beardless Iris Day June 11, 2011**

**Everyone is invited to an Iris Day on June 11, 2011.  
Lecturers will be Brian Mathew and Sidney Linnegar**

**There will be lectures with tea and coffee in the morning and afternoon, and a buffet lunch or bring your own.**

**Come to Aulden Farm, Aulden, Leominster, Herefordshire, where we hold the National Collection of Siberian Iris and see the collection when hopefully it should be at its best and in full flower. The invitation is extended to all members of the BIS and anyone else who is interested in beardless irises.**

The Group for Beardless Iris has not officially met for a long time and the committee feel it is time for everyone to meet each other and enjoy talking irises. Why not bring some of your own Siberian hybrids and get some advice from the experts. It is possible to arrange other visits to extend the Iris Day into a horticultural weekend and suggestions for places to stay will be given, with travel directions, to all the venues.

A flyer is enclosed for you to book a place. Make a note of the date now, June 11, 2011. It will be great to meet fellow enthusiasts - see you in June.

Please return flyer or email or telephone 01568 720129

Jill Whitehead  
Aulden Farm  
[jill@auldenfarm.co.uk](mailto:jill@auldenfarm.co.uk)

## **The BIS Summer Show May 28-29, Hillside Events Centre, RHS Wisley.**

Anne Blanco White is going to give the lecture at the Summer Show. Further details will be in the next Newsletter and on our website.

## **The AGM of the BIS Saturday, September 10, Wisley.**

Tomas Tamberg has very kindly agreed to come over from Germany and give the Bryan Dodsworth Memorial Lecture. Bryan died in 2009 and was an important hybridiser of bearded irises producing many Dykes Medal winners which were featured in the *Year Book* last year. This is the first time that this lecture has been given.

Tomas is an excellent speaker and his lecture is entitled "New hybrids forever?".

## A New Venue for the Spring Shows

### Jill Whitehead

Next year, the BIS is very fortunate to hold its two Spring Shows at Myddelton House, the home of E A Bowles. Very fortunate for two reasons, firstly it will give us an opportunity to see the garden but secondly, because we have two talks arranged, to give us a further insight into Bowles and his garden. Edward Augustus Bowles or “Gussie” to his friends was not only a famous plantsman, but also an author, botanical artist, a philanthropist and a much loved and respected personality. It is more than likely that we have all grown a “Bowles” plant at some time, and the RHS have dedicated an area at Wisley, known as *Bowles Corner*, to his plants. He was awarded the VMH in 1916 and many of his paintings are in the Lindley Library. Bowles was a longstanding member of the British Iris Society; he was on the Joint Iris Committee and was a leading authority on *Crocus*. His book on *Crocus and Colchicums* was published in 1924 with 11 coloured plates of his own watercolours. It was really a guide for gardeners and was the first real study of the genus; not for nothing was he called “The Crocus King”.

Earlier this year we were given an impromptu tour of the garden. It was fascinating and very exciting to see Bowles’ garden after reading so much about it. It was a chance to see the gardens being brought back to life; to see an old path being “found” and to see many of the original plants still growing well. It feels like a new beginning for the garden after many years of neglect. It is all due to the hard work and determination of the head gardeners and the garden staff that it is in existence at all. The gardeners include Geoff Stebbings, Head Gardener from 1984 - 89 who did much to restore the garden during his time there and instigated the NCCPG collection of Dykes Medal-winning irises in the 1980s; Christine Murphy, who is a keen supporter of the Iris Society and now the keen and enthusiastic eye of Andrew Turvey. Andrew has always had a passion for restoring a garden, but it is a delicate balance to look to the future, as well as respect the past, and Andrew handles this extremely well. Careful to consult Bowles’ writings at all stages, although he was only appointed in August 2009, his knowledge of Bowles and his work is already extensive. However, he would be the first to acknowledge that this is due to Bryan Hewitt, who has been a gardener at Myddelton for over 20 years. Bryan is the author of *The Crocus King*, a delightful and informative book about Bowles. Myddelton House Garden is now a place of great excitement as Andrew and his enthusiastic team work to bring the garden back to its former glory. Thanks to external funding the kitchen garden is being restored; the original potting shed is being renovated; the peach house is in the process of being rebuilt and the stables are being converted into an exhibition space and visitor centre. The house and garden are owned by the Lee Valley Regional Park Authority (LVRPA) who, along with the Bowles Society, are working



hard to see this project through. It is a very exciting time and I feel that we are very fortunate in being able to take a small part in this venture. Our Early Spring Show will coincide with snowdrop time, one of Bowles's passions; in fact the term *galanthophile* was probably invented by him, when writing to a fellow snowdrop enthusiast. We are having a lecture by Dr Roger Holland. He is the Chairman of the Bowles Society and is custodian, on behalf of the Society, for the NCCPG *Crocus* collection. This collection now contains 65 cultivars all in some way connected with Bowles. Roger keeps the collection at his home in Cambridge, but hopes to bring a display down to Myddelton for us, weather permitting! His lecture is entitled - **E A Bowles and his Crocuses**. It will be an insight into Bowles and his life as well as the crocuses themselves.

At the Late Spring Show we will be having a lecture by Andrew Turvey – **Uncovering the Hidden Treasures of Myddelton House Garden**. If the weather is kind Andrew will also lead a tour of the garden. But this is no ordinary tour; it is led with passion and numerous anecdotes and little gems that make the garden come alive.

So the Shows promise to be an exciting new venture but one with such important links, not only to the gardening world but also to the iris world and a chance to see Bowles' garden with its new cloak on.

So why not make a date in your diary, come and join us for what promise to be two very interesting and different shows.

### **Early Spring Show Saturday February 12, 2011**

Staging 8 to 10.30 am.

Show open to the public - 12 to 4 pm

Lecture at 2 pm Roger Holland – **E A Bowles and his Crocuses**.

### **Late Spring Show Saturday April 30, 2011**

Staging 8 to 10.30 am.

Show open to the public – 12 to 4 pm

Lecture at 2 pm with the garden tour afterwards.

Andrew Turvey – **Uncovering the Hidden Treasures of Myddelton House Garden**

Myddelton House, Bulls Cross, Enfield, Middlesex. EN2 9HG,  
[www.eabowlessociety.org.uk](http://www.eabowlessociety.org.uk)

## Treasurer & Membership Secretary's Report

### Alun Whitehead

Let us get the formal part over with quickly. It might be important to the running of the group, but it need not fill too much space. Our accounts look healthy and this principally relies on the fact that we have avoided using a commercial printer and have been careful with the pennies. At some stage, we may have to rely solely on commercial printing and the subscription rate reflects this cost. The inflationary outlook remains uncertain. We only have to think of what would happen if oil goes back to being \$140 a barrel from its current \$87 and what this would mean to the petrol price to realise the potential danger. However, with a healthy bank balance I would feel uncomfortable in suggesting any increase to the subscription on what might just turn out to be passing worries.

For the year ended 31<sup>st</sup> December 2009.

Subscriptions:	523.12
Donations	14.50
Seed Sales	208.67
Plant Sales	0.00
Newsletter Cost	0.00
Review Cost	-419.72
Interest Received	0.60
Postage	-13.80
Total : Net increase at bank:	£313.37
Opening Total Bank Balances:	£2286.17
Plus net increase in funds	<u>£ 313.37</u>
	£2599.54
represented by:	
Closing Treasury AC Balance	£1042.74
Closing Current AC Balance less uncleared cheque:	£1556.80
subs paid in advance @ 31.12.2008:	£326.00
@ 31.12.2009:	£393.50

The accounts reflect the dates payments are made and so the cost of the *Review* relates to that in 2008. The cost for 2009 was £191.60 and this will be shown in the 2010 figures, the decrease reflects the fact that due to time pressure we did not use a commercial printer. The Newsletter cost will appear in the 2010 figures. Chris Towers, the BIS Treasurer, kindly reviewed the accounts and a copy of his statement is available to members (just send an SAE or email). No matters arose which gave concern and we would like to thank Chris for giving his time so generously.

## Web Membership Group

You will remember that at the beginning of the year we introduced a new category of web membership. I am pleased to welcome those as well as the traditional new members who have joined during the past year. Taking both categories, our membership has stayed broadly the same, despite being in a period of major sea change – so we are to be congratulated. The retirement age will be rising affecting people's leisure time and looking round meetings of various plant groups during the year, older faces are becoming less numerous. The problem of succession in many organisations has never been properly addressed or planned.

Our web membership Group that we have created has the advantage of being accessible to a wider range of people – the website is being read by the greatest numbers in Russia, Britain, and the United States in that order, but with readers in nearly every country around the globe. All those with interesting and enquiring minds who seek to pick the best of the brains and experience of other irisarians, past and present, are most welcome. A web membership is completely free at [www.beardlessiris.org](http://www.beardlessiris.org). You do not have to supply your email address but it is helpful to us and for our records to know how many online members we have and what the general interest is around the globe.

With this in mind, on the CD and on our website you will find the first half of *Dykes on Irises*, an anthology of his articles. These make surprisingly easy reading, though you may need to be careful of some of the names. You will find that articles in this format are searchable which makes them even more useful. I have started converting the Group's early Newsletters as well, but progress has been slow because the quality of the original does not scan easily and has to be carefully checked. However, the first six are there for you to enjoy.

### **2011 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 2011 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.

## **An AGM (Award of Garden Merit) for your iris?**

### **Alun Whitehead**

As a plant lover, you will know that the Royal Horticultural Society can give an Award of Garden Merit (AGM) to various plants that have been on trial, but unless you are involved with the trials you might not know how irises can obtain this award or how you can get your iris into the trials.

The history of iris trials at Wisley goes back to the 1920s when the RHS took over the grounds. One of the covenants was to provide trials on the site. Luckily for us W R Dykes became Secretary of the RHS and iris trialling at Wisley began.

The trials have been run by the Joint Iris Committee, which is nominally composed of members from the RHS and the BIS, but in practice members belong to both. As part of the reorganisation in the last 2 years, the name was changed to the Iris Sub-Committee (ISC), but “JIC” still seems to roll off the tongue so you are likely to hear both. The ISC meets several times a year for judging existing trials, looking at potential new entrants, and trying to understand/remedy any problems that might arise. From an iris perspective, the main cause of concern is often small localised areas of “dying-off” in the Portsmouth Field which may have something to do with it acting as a trial ground for so long, but may also arise from hard pans forming and affecting the natural water flow. This can be frustrating, but highlights a key feature – the iris trials are just that, *trials*: not scientific tests. Three plants of each variety are planted and generally, it is based on how these perform over three years that awards are given. For practical purposes, a trial makes good sense. For instance, if the assessment was scientific, plants would be randomly spread around the plot instead of in rows of three – making judging and viewing by the public more confusing as well as losing the impact of the group.

Another method open to the ISC is to recommend an AGM around the table. This occurs where a plant is already widely grown and enough members are familiar with it to form an opinion. Whilst irises occasionally receive an award this way, the vast majority receive it for their performance in the trials.

If you want your iris entered into a trial, a stalk of the iris needs to be brought to an ISC meeting. There is usually a meeting at each BIS show; other meetings are listed in the *BIS Year Book*. Alternatively, you can contact a member of the ISC and see if it is possible for someone to bring it to the meeting for you; we are always happy to help. Choose a fresh stalk that gives a good representation of the plant. A typical flower lasts for 3 days, so do not pick one that has been open for 2 days. Include the names of the parents, if possible, which helps the committee to

understand the plant. Include whether it has been pot grown or in the ground and with or without protection. Think about taking photographs to show what it looks like in a clump.

Occasionally when space allows, ISC members can nominate irises for inclusion in the trials. This is particularly useful for overseas entries where the only alternative would be to arrange for someone to grow the iris in the UK so that a stem can be presented in the usual way.

In recent years, the iris trials have been judged on a points basis:

Plant	35%
Stem	15%
Flower	30%
Presentation	20%

This is largely a matter of common sense.

**Plant:** Is the plant healthy? Does it increase well? At Wisley plants are typically planted 75 cm apart in the row and at the end of the third year they normally fill their space. Growth rates vary on different sites, so they may not behave the same in your garden.

**Stem:** Normally it has to be straight, bearing the flowers clear of leaves. The number of buds, how they are arranged and how they open is important. Irises are not there to give just a splash of colour; the flower shape has a beauty in itself perhaps enhanced by various markings. This would be lost if the flowers were too close together. It is also known that where Siberians have too many buds in a socket, sometimes the later flowers do not open properly or two may open together giving a cluttered effect.

**Flower:** The beauty of the iris lies in the symmetry. Does the flower give a pleasing effect? Is it in proportion to the plant? Is it weather resistant? The exact forms will change with fashion to an extent, as a glance over the last 100 years will readily confirm. I would suggest that if you have something which looks good in the garden, please bring it along.

**Presentation:** When you see a clump from a distance, does it catch your eye and invite closer inspection? Have a look from different sides.

Irises are frequently criticised, especially the bearded, for having a short flowering season. This is unfair in my opinion. We have sold many perennials over the years and most will be in reasonable flower for 3 weeks, giving you 2 weekends to sell them at their peak. If you want to stretch it, you can note the first flower to open and the last, there will often be about a month between. The exception will be the spurias, which flower for only about 2 weeks, but make up for this by their late and bold display.

At the time of writing I am probably tempting fate as there is a review, by the RHS, of all the trials using the Wisley grounds. We have been lucky in having a permanent trial ground there over the years but there is pressure to trial a wider range of plants. The argument is - why should the trial grounds

be dominated by chrysanthemums, dahlias and irises when there is such a vast range of plants. This sounds very reasonable, until you remember that the Victorians were very strong plant collectors in their own right, and the plants, such as irises, that we grow in the garden are the survivors of natural selection by gardeners from an extensive range of introductions. The new trials system at Wisley will do away with permanent trials, but new trials will be undertaken when there is sufficient new material to warrant them, i.e. we will have to make a case for a trial rather than taking it for granted. Given that the use of resources must be justified in the modern age, this is understandable.

2011 will be an important year in the AGM calendar. Every ten years, all the AGMs are reviewed and 2012 is the next “sunset year”, but the decisions will be made in 2011. The criteria to judge whether an AGM is still valid will be principally whether

1. the plant is still available to the public
2. has it been superseded by a better, improved cultivar.

2011 is also important to us as it is the end of the Pacific Coast, Siberian and Wetland trials. Do make the most of these by visiting the Portsmouth Field. There are discussions about a Dutch Iris Trial so new things are in the offing. When you see your seedlings flower, bring them along to the shows, or talk to one of the committee if you would like advice – we will be delighted to see you succeed.

Alun Whitehead is a member of the Iris Sub-Committee, but all views expressed are his own. Further information on the trials can be seen on <http://www.rhs.org.uk/trials>.

## **RHS and BIS awards given to beardless irises.**

### **The Hugh Miller Trophy**

This was presented by H F R Miller for hybrids of non-bearded irises

1962	‘Bluecape’	(SIB, Kitton)
1963	‘Banbury Beauty’	(PCI, Brummitt)
1964	‘Nottingham Lace’	(SIB, Hutchison)
1965	‘Banbury Welcome’	(PCI, Brummitt)
1966	‘Violet Mere’	(SIB, Hutchison)
1967	‘Cambridge’	(SIB, Brummitt)
1968	‘Dreaming Spires’	(SIB, Brummitt)
1969	‘Sea Shadows’	(SIB, Brummitt)
1970-1972	no awards	
1973	‘No Name’	(PCI, Brummitt)
1974	‘Limeheart’	(SIB, Brummitt)
1975	‘Banbury Velvet’	(PCI, Brummitt)



1976	no award
1977 'Anniversary'	(SIB, Brummitt)
1978 'Holden Clough'	(SPEC-X, Patton)
1979 'Gerald Darby'	(SPEC-X, Coe/Darby)
1980 'Blue Ballerina'	(PCI, Knowles)
1981-1985	no awards
1986 'Clee Hills'	(SIB, Hewitt)
1987-1989	no awards
1990 'Laurenbuhl'	(SIB, E. Berlin)
1991-1994	no awards
1995 'Catherine Howard'	(SIB, Tubbs)
1996 'Oban'	(SIB, H. Foster)
1997 'Prussian Blue'	(SIB, Tamberg)
1998	no award
1999 'Zakopane'	(SIB, Bartlett)
2000-2004	no awards
2005 'Granny Jean'	(SIB, Bartlett)
2006-2008	no awards
2009 'Philippa Baughen'	(SPU, Baughen)
2010	no award

### **Dykes Medal**

1971 'Cambridge'	(SIB, Brummitt)
1975 'No Name'	(PCI, Brummitt)
1979 'Anniversary'	(SIB, Brummitt)
1999 'Berlin Ruffles'	(SIB, Tamberg)
2000 'Perfect Vision'	(SIB, Bartlett)
2008 'Peter Hewitt'	(SIB, Hewitt)

**Marjorie Brummitt Trophy** The trophy is a painting, by Pauline Dean, of Marjorie Brummitt's 'Banbury Beauty' and was awarded originally for PCIs.

1996 'Goring Ace'	(Maynard)
1997 'Lincoln Imp'	(J. Dodsworth)
1998-2003	no awards
2004 'Peacock Panache'	(Scopes)
2005	no award
2006 'Pinewood Passion'	(Wise)
2007-2009	no awards

This is now a Show Award given to whoever gains the most points for Beardless Irises in all 3 shows.

2010 Iris Clarke.

## **Magical PCIs**

### **Father Philip Jones**

For a moment last May, I and my PCIs came very close to becoming members of the Magic Circle. We had performed an amazing trick, a trick that defied all explanation. The only problem was that I did not understand how this extraordinary stunt had come about. What had happened? Two years ago, I bought a packet of seed from Joe Ghio (the King of PCIs) in America. This was seed from specialised crosses but it was all mixed together in the same packet. When the first flowers from this seed appeared in early summer 2010 the dark reds were together, the strong yellows were together, and the blue and white patterned flowers were together. How I had managed this was a mystery. The only way to solve it was to go back to the beginning and track what I had done. Only then did the fog start to lift.

The seed was sown at the Monastery in Perth and when the seedlings came through they were transplanted. The stronger seedlings were planted directly into the ground, the rest went into troughs. When planting them in troughs they were spaced according to size; the largest four went into one trough, six in another, and eight of the smallest in another. They moved with me to the Monastery in Dysart, and were planted out in the same order. Like all tricks, once it was explained, it seemed obvious and even predictable. Different plants perform differently but there is something constant about each of them, each in its own way.

There are still some of the American hybrids to flower so perhaps there are more colours to come. I used the photos of the ones that have flowered in a talk I gave on PCIs last October to Lanark Gardening Club. (Heartfelt thanks to Christine and Roger who were so helpful.) Most of the other photos from Brita were of the modern American PCIs. The photos were of plants grown by Geoff Wilson, Louth, Lincolnshire, and John Taylor, New South Wales, Australia, but all originally from Joe Ghio seed and what an extraordinary display they made. The range of colours and flower forms seems endless. I also received very fine pictures of the species from Kathleen Sayce who is the Secretary/Treasurer of the Society of Pacific Coast Native Irises. Debby Cole who is the President of the SPCNI emailed me photos with a challenging, “which is the best flower of the series of Valley Banner<sup>1</sup> hybrids”, rather like my blue and white patterned seedlings. It was impossible to decide on a clear winner. Everyone has their own ideas - the irises may to some degree be constant and predictable - but not the human beings.

It is important to mention that the modern American hybrid plants that have so far flowered here were very similar to plants that appeared on the photos from Brita. The SPCNI ([www.pacificcoastiris.org](http://www.pacificcoastiris.org)) have a very large selection of crosses in their seed distribution plants this year. Joe

Ghio's e-mail is [ghiobayview@surfnetusa.com](mailto:ghiobayview@surfnetusa.com). Buying seed is a very good option for introducing these irises into one's gardening life. In the past plants bought from America did not do well. Many of the stronger colours derive from *I. munzii*, which does not like the cold<sup>2</sup>. On the East Coast of America, these irises have been crossed with *I. tenax*, the hardiest<sup>3</sup> PCI species, and this has helped to toughen them up to face harsh winters. What this winter's weather will subject these new plants of mine to, and how they cope, will make interesting results. Then I can start to assess how well my new plants are likely to survive in our changeable climate.

In previous years, I have made some elementary mistakes growing irises from seed but last winter with a changed formula, everything has gone well. I am growing my seed in mushroom boxes. These are deeper than the usual seed trays and I am using more grit in the compost. The drainage is good. Added, after sowing, is a surface coating of broken down bark and wood mulch to protect them in dry periods. I am growing quite a few species and the more vigorous plants have already been planted out. The rest have been left in the seed boxes and it was pleasing to note more were starting to come through in October.

In the Monastery here in Dysart, I have a trial bed out in the open and another sloping section that gets the sun until early afternoon. This seems to be a good place for growing the species, as most of them like some shade during part of the day. Three iris species form the backbone of modern PCI hybrids. *I. innominata* is the most graceful with one or two flowers to each stem. *I. douglasiana* brings vigour and adaptability and has more flowers to the stem, and is sometimes branched. *I. munzii* could also be included here, introducing more flowers than the other species and extending the colour range. It is even more vigorous than *I. douglasiana* but it does not like the cold. *I. tenax* is the hardiest of the species and, like *I. innominata*, has one or two flowers to the stem. It is found in many different colours but may not last for more than a few years and may not do well in very warm locations.

Crosses between the species can throw up some unusual plants. Recently I was reading the Spring SPCNI Almanac from 1999 where it was recorded that a cross between *I. tenax* and *I. chrysophylla* bloomed for seventy days!

There was another article on a late flowering *I. douglasiana* entitled "Overpowering Genetics", where this species obviously prevailed over any and every other iris it was crossed with, either as a pod parent or a pollen parent:

"From these crosses, 173 plants have bloomed, and regardless of whether the non-late plant was the pod or pollen parent, all the flowers have been so close to look alike that you would think the entire planting was from a single clone."

This statement is at odds with a theory which I have referred to in the past about crossing species and hybrids. The theory came from a man who was growing gentians and who said that he crossed the offspring with the pod parent to consolidate the pod parent's main features so that they dominated the new hybrids. A botanist who was visiting her sister at the Monastery here said it was possible that someone may have a reason for back-crossing particular plants in this way, but it was clear that the theory was not a universal law. I did not think it was some kind of necessary law, but thought it might give rise to a small percentage of good results.

Now this may seem very odd but the fact is that, although I have shelved the gentian man's theory, I do intend to put it into practice. At least I will try to find out what happens when *I. douglasiana* is crossed with *I. innominata* and *I. tenax*. *I. douglasiana* has the vigour which allows the PCIs to survive in all sorts of places. It has the easily recognisable feature of having two or three flowers to the stem and can be branched. It has broader foliage than *I. innominata* and *I. tenax* which has grassy foliage. I hope to see if there is any difference which way the cross is made, and I will pollinate the offspring with each other and with themselves. Furthermore, I will cross the offspring back on the pod parent and - not to leave any stone unturned or avenue unexplored - the pollen parent.

One reason for doing this is because there are many beautiful PCI species which may be difficult to grow but one could possibly get pollen to use to cross with the species that do well and with which one is already familiar. There are great possibilities here and at the present time it is becoming more recognised that this has been neglected in pursuit of big and rather more overpoweringly modern PCIs. In the current *Almanac* Kathleen Sayce argues in favour of the species and the possibility of producing strong hybrids that carry on their special simple elegance. This is contrary to the current trend that favours the modern Joe Ghio hybrids. Two reasons are given for the current trend. First, the people who give awards to PCIs tend to be connected with the San Francisco Bay area where Joe Ghio irises grow well. It is argued that simpler hybrids, closer to the species, could well have a wider range and, in many places, may not be as difficult to grow as the PCIs that get all the present publicity. Secondly, the judges are seen to be affected by the TBs that tend to set the tone. Hybridisers aim at a "fat" flower that fills all the space.

It is interesting to speculate whether over the years we may have had a similar problem. It is a question of where you expect your irises to grow that determines how you want them to look, and how they come to be judged. If you want them to compete with the TBs in a sunny border or on the patio then Joe Ghio will supply you. However, if you are looking for something for the alpine garden or the mixed perennial border and

shrubby simpler hybrids from the species would not only fit in and contribute to the scene, they would also survive.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Valley Banner is a pattern often seen in hybrid plants where *tenax* and *chrysophylla* overlap. The flower characteristics are pale standards, white or cream falls veined dark blue/purple, and deeper styles. Several hybridisers have had a lot of fun crossing seedlings of that pattern with other good patterns, like *plicatas*, to produce some of the modern hybrids.

<sup>2</sup> Victor Cohen - *A Guide to the PACIFIC COAST IRISES*. Page 14. Dr Lenz considered *I. munzii* “less tolerant of cold than other species in the Californicae”. He was referring to the fact that they grew well in the orange groves of Springville. (See Debby’s comments).

<sup>3</sup> In the *Almanac* 1998 on page 13 John White explains in his article “The East Coast makes small steps towards adapting PCIs to Winter Cold”. His *I. tenax* seedlings from his own crosses are growing well. In the Fall *Almanac* 2005 page 8, in an article by Garry Knipe - Cold Climate PCI Seed - he explains, “The idea here is to combine the cold hardy *I. tenax* with the modern hybrids.” Garry refers to John White having great success with seed which includes *I. tenax* in the parentage and how a large batch of seedlings have survived the last two brutal winters. He goes on to say he hopes to donate more seed to the SPCNI incorporating these cold hardy genes. “Hopefully, other folk in cold winter areas will start having success with these *I. tenax* x modern hybrid Pacificas”. (See Debby’s comments)

## A piece of good news for pollinators.

In Currier McEwen's book on Siberian irises, he writes about pollinating in the open. There are no contraptions or constructions protecting the flowers from the bees and other insects. He simply removes the petals so the bees cannot land in the way they usually do. They will still visit the iris and feed but will not be brushing up against the stigma flap and pollinating it. Standards, falls and anthers are all removed leaving only the styles and pollination by human hand takes place in the open. His experiment on one hundred Japanese irises consisted in removing all the petals except the styles and leaving them to the bees. Only 2% bore seed. Of another hundred plants that retained their petals, 46% were pollinated. Experiments by other hybridists bore similar results.

Plants are ready to be pollinated for only three days beginning from when they open. In my short experience of hybridising, it is the pollen part that can be difficult. It helps if you can water the plants the night before and

get the pollen first thing in the morning. When I had my plants in an open field with no real chance of watering them, we had a very dry spell and some plants did not seem to have any pollen. The next year when it was very wet some buds took an eternity to open and when they did open the pollen of these plants seemed to have already gone over. The possibility of being able to harvest the pollen when it is available, therefore, becomes an important matter.

Pollen dried by ordinary sunlight will keep for a long time. I have always left the pollen on the anther but last summer found that after a few days the anther would go mouldy. Perhaps the drying was not long enough. My botanic visitor suggested I should have put it in a container in the fridge after drying. Perhaps the most important advice of all appeared in the *Fall Almanac* 2007 where in order to keep pollen dry “from one year’s end to the next” Dr Lee Lenz used a desiccant with some mesh material arranged so that the pollen and the desiccant are not in immediate contact. This needs looking into before next summer.

There can be problems making a cross. I have discovered that the bamboo canes that have been moulded into a U shape available from the nurseries are very useful. Cut to different sizes they can steady the unsteady hand holding the flower, and also, the other unsteady hand holding the small watercolour paint brush. It is best not to hold it at the end, as an artist might do, but lower down close to the brush end, which I prefer to be short-haired. I use a piece of metal paper, of the kind that contains medicine tablets, to gently open the flap and place the pollen on the brush just inside or on the flap without causing damage to the stigma.

In pollinating irises, the main problem for me, is simply getting into a position where you can hold the stem and gently lift the style so that you can see what you are trying to do. This is particularly the case when the irises are not very high. Lying flat out on the ground with one’s head resting upon the damp earth can cause comment. Mother Prioress explains it away by saying that the chaplain to the Monastery is simply working on a new form of cosmic contemplation.

## **How native iris grow on the Pacific Coast**

### **Debby Cole**

*I. munzii* is prized for its potential for turquoise-blue. Its flowers in nature are generally lavender-turquoise, but hybridisers have assumed that that is merely a challenge. I understand that Jean Stevens of New Zealand was the first to cross *I. munzii* with *I. innominata*, and that some of the interesting earlier hybrids out of Australia are from that breeding. *I. munzii* is a large plant, and its foliage tends to be very determined (stiff, blue-green) and somewhat rust-prone. Where I saw it blooming, I wouldn’t have thought it disliked the cold any more than the other PC species; this was along the



north-facing wall of the first canyon south of Sequoia National Park, in the foothills of California's Sierra Nevada. At the time we had just driven south through the park, and there were still deep snowdrifts sitting around in there. More flowers than the other species except *I. douglasiana*? Well, okay, *I. munzii* does often have 3 buds in the terminal, but *I. douglasiana* is the only species with branching.

*I. douglasiana* is an iris that will tolerate sun or shade, humid or dry, but it is not particularly heat-tolerant or cold-tolerant, and usually occurs naturally within 20 miles of the coast. That marine influence does indeed save it from extremes.

*I. tenax* is indeed the species growing furthest north in nature, but calling it “hardest” may involve a few assumptions. You mention that it may not last for more than a few years; that species may turn out to be more dependent on seeding for survival than some. And, as you say, it may not do well in very warm locations; it certainly doesn't like being in full hot sunshine and is by nature a creature of the light woodlands. That being said, I have several clumps that have been with me for 20+ years in semi-shade.

*I would like to thank Debby for all the additional information she has supplied to us about the species and their characteristics. It goes to prove that we should always try out plants in our own gardens before deciding that they are too tender. The cheapest way to do this trial is by sowing seed now that we know they can survive in many other situations.* Philip

Probably the wet had swelled and exploded the pollen so it was useless. It is known that pollination in wet weather is a waste of time. Wet air seems to be as bad as actual rain on the flowers. Pollen can also get dried out and be equally useless. It's usually recommended that picked anthers are not dried in sunlight as they can get too hot and dry - just in a warm place. I've never had anthers go mouldy but could it have been moist air + sunlight, the conditions that induce botrytis? Yes to fridge but in a container and desiccant. Jennifer

For any members who may not have a copy of Victor Cohen's, “A Guide to the *PACIFIC COAST IRISES*” and would like one, you can order from Alun Whitehead, Treasurer. The original booklet was issued in the 1960s, however, it is still a handy reference – particularly for the species. If you are in the UK and would like a copy, please send £3 to the Treasurer by cheque payable to the Group for Beardless Irises or via PayPal to [sales@beardlessiris.org](mailto:sales@beardlessiris.org). The cost for Europe is £3.80 and £4.80 for the rest of the world, to cover the extra postage costs. Alun

***Iris sanguinea* var. *tobataensis* Shimobu Akiyama and  
Tsukasa Iwashina  
Anne Blanco White**

We have to thank Mr Hiroshi Shimizu of the Japan Iris Society for a copy of the paper about this iris.

This small form of *I. sanguinea* has a rather surprising history. It seems first to have been recognised in 1875 (*I. sanguinea* proper dates from 1813) and since then has been consistently confused with *I. rossii* which does not grow in the same area at all. Everything has been further complicated by the existence of a “Pumila” cultivar of *I. laevigata* which has a much longer flower stem. Worse still, there are a number of “small” irises with similar flower colours and sizes in both Japan and the neighbouring mainlands with which it could be confused in casual description such as *Ii. ruthenica*, *quinghanica* and *loczyi*.

Originally the plant was known from Kozomino in Fukuoka Prefecture and was called “Kokakitsubata” though the describer is unknown. It is now colloquially called either “Tobata-ayame” or “Kozomino-no-ko-kakitsubata” and is found only in cultivation in Tobata, Kitakyushu City, Fukuoka Pref. in northern Kyushu. Indeed it features in the city’s homepage: <http://www.kitakyushu.jp>. Sadly, the wild population seems to be extinct so it is not surprising that now it is “known only from cultivation”.

The leaves are up to 25 cm long, clearly 1-2 veined, and up to 5 mm wide. The two flowers may be purple or white in colour, up to 7 cm wide, and carried on stems up to 3 cm tall. So there is a modest plant with the flowers very much at the bases of the leaves – rather like *I. pontica* or *I. setosa* subsp. *canadensis* – yet clearly a form of *sanguinea*.

With a range of possible identifications, modern chemistry was employed by the authors to confirm the true identity of this plant through a study of the flavonoid composition of the flowers and leaves and so distinguish it from *I. sanguinea* var. *sanguinea*.

*I. sanguinea* var. *sanguinea* Hornem itself has a more directly comparable variant in *I. sanguinea* var. *yixingensis* YT. Zhao from China. At the same time the dwarf cultivar has an equally entertaining history – if not more so – known as “Chabo-ayame” it is also recognised as *I. nertschinskia* Lodd or *I. sanguinea* var. *pumila* (Makino) Tomino; it is distinctively dwarf, but the flower stems are longer so that the flowers are nearly as tall as the leaves.

Sadly, there is as yet no available photograph of the new plant.

But there is a moral to the story: when visiting strange gardens we should always watch for the unexpected plant – it may be worthy of serious attention.

## **Louisianas in Bloom**

### **Mark Haslett**

This year has been an interesting test for LAs, starting as we did with a very harsh winter. I wondered if they would flower after planting some of them in the margins of a purpose built pond filled only with rainwater. I used 'Black Gamecock', 'Brookvale Nocturne' and a mystery LA which was not labelled and these test plants have thrived and flowered well for me. I bought two large containers, which can only be described as deep plasterers' trays available from DIY places such as *Homebase*. These act as self contained mini bogs/ponds, where I grew 'Black Gamecock' in one and 'Fleur Collette Louise' in the other and planted a few other bog plants as companions.

The containers allow the plants to sit in waterlogged conditions and with a hole drilled in the side stoppered with a bung, the water level can be controlled and then allowed to be drained easily to avoid stagnation of the mini bog.

The LAs loved these conditions and bloomed profusely in the rich organic soil. This year seems to have been a good year for LAs and I was amazed to see how many blooms there were on 95% of the plants after being warned of their tendency not to flower well. The collection flowered in colours ranging from pinks, purples, yellows, and whites.

All plants were exposed to the elements and experienced the full effects of the winter. They are grown in rich organic soil which is made up of a general farmyard organic manure mixed with a mixture of composts to form its planting medium supplemented with slow release pellets. (In the USA they use a manure called Black cow.)

It will be interesting to see how the plants do next season after whatever winter is in store for us. Was the success due to a) the colder weather we had this last winter giving them a proper rest or b) has the richer growing medium played a more important role, or c) was it a combination of both or something else? One interesting point to note is the bloom size. I found that if the plant is given a plentiful supply of water the bloom size increases and that plants with a restricted water supply produce smaller blooms despite being the same cultivar.

I will continue with my experiments over the coming months and intend to obtain some species LAs with a view to producing new hybrids in the future with improved vigour and flowering ability, and to help expand the scope of my collection which currently is over 60 cultivars and clones. I will keep members informed of my progress over the coming months so watch this space.

*See Mark's photographs on the CD.*

## ***Iris unguicularis* – a Winter Joy**

### **Jill Whitehead**

Well what do you do on Christmas Day? If you are a gardener then it is likely that you'll walk round the garden to see what's in flower. The one iris that I am likely to find in bloom is *Iris unguicularis*. Of course, if we have any significant snowfall even this delightful occupation may be too hazardous. *I. unguicularis* can often start into flower in October, especially if the summer has been hot and dry, and continues throughout the winter. I have seen a long ribbon of plants still flowering profusely in mid April. At any time of year this iris would be welcome, but in the dark depths of winter it is especially so.

*I. unguicularis* was for many years known as *I. stylosa*, a pretty name, but *unguicularis* has to be the correct botanical name because it predates the other, admittedly by only 13 years, back in 1785, but a rule is a rule. The name refers to the narrowness of the base of the flower segments. To understand the name better, it refers to the botanical name for the narrow, lower end of a petal. An *unguis* is a nail or claw and *unguiculus* is a fingernail or toenail. But enough botany, I am a gardener and want to find the ideal homes for my plants. However, the best way to do this is to look at their natural habitats, always a good basis, but just occasionally it is surprising how well plants adapt.

So where does it grow; the native land is Algeria and other countries around the Mediterranean, including some islands such as Crete. The terrain is stony ground often with low shrubs for protection, suggesting poor but sunny conditions.

Vita Sackville West said in her newspaper article of 1950,

“They are most obliging plants, even if maltreated, but a little extra kindness and understanding will bring forth an even better response. As is true of most of us, whether plants or humans. Kindliness, so far as the Algerian iris is concerned, consists in starving it. Rich cultivation makes it run to leaf rather than to flower”.

So ideally it wants to grow at the base of a south facing wall. However, if you go to Cambridge Botanic Gardens in winter, and stroll through the appropriately named Winter Garden, you will see *I. unguicularis* flowering profusely, at the base of a yew hedge, in a narrow border, with a path alongside. I can only presume that the greedy roots of the yew take out the goodness from the soil thus creating the conditions that it prefers. The path allows you to walk close to the plants, so that you can enjoy the beauty of the flowers and their scent. This seems a good idea and solves the problem of the south-facing wall. Yews are notorious for sucking the nutrients from the soil around them but other hedges might work just as well. Has anyone tried it? Do get in touch if you grow *I. unguicularis* in other situations. It is



*Iris angustata (stylata)*

This drawing was first printed in the 1950 *Year Book* by the artist was Dorothea F Maclagan who was a member of the BIS.

considered difficult to flower and it would be good to compare secrets of success. Sidney Linnegar tells the story of how, as a schoolboy, he grew this plant but it didn't flower and he dug it up and left it, in disgust, on top of the ground, in front of a low south facing wall, where it then flowered prolifically: an early lesson well learnt.

Now for the flowers which is why this plant is so special in the middle of winter. The leaves are often very untidy, forming a grassy clump, and opinions vary as to whether you should tidy these by just clearing out the brown leaves or by cutting down the foliage, but it really seems to be a personal choice. However you choose to treat the leaves your patience will be rewarded when the flowers appear. They are quite exquisite and just seem too fragile to survive the rigours of winter. The flowers are almost stemless with a very long perianth tube: a unique feature is that the back of the style arm appears to be covered in gold dust, but it is really a yellow gland. Flower colour does seem to vary but is usually pale to deep lavender with faint veining and markings on the falls. 'Walter Butt' is said to flower earlier, a larger flower, palest lavender with greenish markings. 'Mary Barnard' is almost purple and quite vigorous. Both these were collected by E B Anderson. There is a form called 'Abington Purple', which is deep purple and one to look out for. 'Alba' varies quite considerably, some not as floriferous as others. I notice that Bob Brown has introduced a new form 'Diana Clare', named after his wife. Any forms would be a most welcome addition to the garden.

Although these irises do seem to thrive on some neglect I have a sneaky suspicion that they would appreciate a light feed in spring with a liquid feed, especially if the weather is dry for some time, followed by as much sun as possible! The important thing is to keep an eye out for snails who enjoy the foliage and can wreak havoc on the flowers even when they are still in a very tight bud stage. I agree entirely with Margery Fish when she maintained that the best way to appreciate them was to cut or rather pull the flowers and bring them indoors. It is important to pick them when they are still in bud, and soon you will be able to enjoy the fragrance and appreciate their beauty from the comfort of an armchair. Margery always thought they looked best if displayed in a pewter mug, I can certainly see this enhancing the flower colour. Personally, I use an old scent bottle which I found when digging the garden. But whatever you choose, I am sure that these small beardless irises would be a welcome addition to the garden and just think of the added pleasure when you wander round the garden on Christmas Day.



## Who needs flowers? Alun Whitehead

It is funny how different aspects strike us each year. Having nearly all the Siberians in the Collection in flower made me look a lot harder at them – a chance to compare. And perhaps because of the anticipation, it was the buds before the flowers that made a big impression.

It was a couple of years ago that I started to notice the pictures created by some of the buds. One that really struck me was that of 'Wealden Skies'. As the flowers start to push through the bracts, they look like small ice cream cones (perhaps a little more cylindrical) emphasised by a slight bluish ring at the bottom of the ice cream. In the evening light they glisten and the creeping shadows around the base only emphasise the contrast. In 'Wealden Skies', the bud bracts themselves are green, but growing here they are of a paler green which enriches the white.

Bract colour is not something new, but is found in the earliest cultivars. Both 'Baxteri' and 'Superba' have a good deep red and this is hardly surprising being the characteristics of *Iris sanguinea*, from which the name derives.

The show stopper for me this year was 'Kingfisher' registered by W R Dykes in 1923 and it is still amazingly hard to find a peer in this respect. The bracts are of a deep red-purple which can be attractive by themselves, but once the dark violet-blue flowers emerge, the contrast is stunning. The plant is floriferous and so one is presented with a dense, complicated but pleasing mix.

My choice for grace and charm this year went to 'Atlantic Crossing'. It is a useful plant here, and also infuriating, because it often produces flowers in September. Infuriating, well yes, just after you have cut off all the old seed heads to stop the irises self-sowing, 'Atlantic Crossing' will produce a few more! However, the grace and elegance of the purple stained buds snaking their way skyward in their enchanting dance definitely had a certain magic. There is another reason that I find 'Atlantic Crossing' exasperating, no matter which camera I try, Fuji, Canon or Nikon the colour always comes out nondescript. Often with these shots, it can be rectified by taking a little of the red out until the leaves look right. However, this doesn't work with 'Atlantic Crossing', so for me the beauty is in the bud and I will leave the flowers for the next man.

The next effect I want to mention does involve flowers, but it was the way the stems were arranged which gave the dominant effect rather than the flowers themselves. On a charity day, the local postmistress appeared at the barn door with the usual question: "can you identify?" I racked my brains but could not think of what was causing the excitement. So welcoming a chance to leave others with the work, I absconded down the garden to the new spuria bed. A fault with some spurias is that the "elbows"

along the stem can be awkward or ungainly. ‘Innovator’, the plant in question, did have the zigzag kinks, but this together with the slightly splayed effect was very striking. It was a recent planting and therefore only had three stalks so the effect was simple and uncluttered. Whether in future years with more stalks the splaying will cause an untidy arrangement, we will have to see, but it will live on in some people’s memories for its artistic endeavour this year.

Finally, the last subject, I’m afraid, will confirm people’s doubt about my sanity! Do you find roots beautiful? For some time I have been mulling over how to observe the iris roots to better understand their development. For Dykes, the scraping away of the soil around the rhizome to see if new roots were being formed seems to have sufficed (or alternatively a herbarium specimen). This guided him as to whether it was a good time to plant. I was hoping for something a bit more detailed. I have heard of someone growing plants in Perspex containers which in turn are sunk into opaque ones, so the roots are in darkness but can easily be observed by lifting out the inner container. This seems relatively straightforward and the only thing lacking for emulation is the time and organisation. Perhaps, a seedling repotted this year will provide the spur. I tend to repot PCIs once the worst frosts are over and in the hope that they will establish themselves during the season and enjoy the nutrients for a better display of flowers. One of the seedlings had the not uncommon red flush to the lower leaves, but this colour extended on a few of the major roots making them distinctly pink. Again some pinkness in the roots is quite common, but it was the deepest I’ve seen to date and so took a photograph.

Of course, the real beauty of the iris comes from the flower and I wouldn’t want to suggest otherwise. But do take a look at the rest of the plant. After all, in judging for garden-worthiness at the Wisley Trials, the flower itself is only 35% of the marks. We expect a bit more than a pretty flower.



**Iris ‘Innovator’** © A Whitehead

## In Praise of *Iris Foetidissima*

### Cy Bartlett

If *Iris foetidissima* was a difficult plant to grow, extremely fussy about its soil and situation, all the pundits would rave about it. The majority of irises have a few weeks of splendour and for the rest of the year are not of great horticultural value. *Iris foetidissima*, on the other hand, is of some interest all the year round. It is persistently evergreen whenever the climate will allow it to be so, and not just evergreen in the rather uninteresting way that privet is evergreen. Slender 12-36 ins (30-90 cm) sword-like leaves of bright, glossy, elegant deep green arch and shimmer in the breeze. From these leaves in June and July rise stems which bear up to 9 flowers though 4-7 is more usual. In the majority of books on irises these are generally described as being of dull, leaden greyish purple hue. Certainly there are seedlings which have flowers like this but there are some pretty grotesque flowers which appear in a TB seedling patch.

The flowers are extremely variable in terms of colour, form, size and general habit. It is easy enough to select only seedlings which appeal and to discard those which have poor flowers. The normal form with blue/purple falls and rose/fawn standards and style arms can vary enormously from bright reddish lavender to quite intense blue violet. The standards and styles too can vary from quite brown to pinkish fawn to ochre. In addition the venation and haft markings may be prominent or blurred in outline, and again variable in colour. A range of yellow flowers is common from the normal, relatively small flowered cream and grey brown combination given the varietal name 'Citrina' to a much larger more solidly greenish yellow form called 'Lutescens'. Hybrids between these two and normal types are easy to produce and a whole range of different "yellows" is possible.

The almost complete old gold/ochre self is of particular interest in view of the sheer size of the flowers, (well over 5 ins in diameter), and the colour is one which most people would not associate with this particular iris. A very good 28 in. lavender-lilac form collected in Wales by B LeRoy Davidson was registered as 'Nant Gwilw' in 1979. In 1983 I registered a vigorous, very large flowered 2 in. pale yellow with blurred grey hafts as 'Moonshy'. Recently I was given a piece of the so-called white flowered form and I look forward to its flowering in the near future. Potential for further colour variation will be enhanced thereby.

In some seedlings the stems may be as short as 10 ins especially when grown in exposed positions while others will be well over 30 ins in length. This can create problems in the third and probably the best feature of this iris namely the brilliant orange scarlet seeds held for months from October to January. I like the name given to this iris in certain parts of U.S.A. as "The Christmas Iris" on account of its red seeds against evergreen

foliage. In the sheltered hedgerows of Somerset the seeds may well hold right through to March/April.

More seed pods/stalk would seem to be a desirable objective in hybridizing. Unfortunately, this adds to the weight on the end of the stalks creating considerable gravitational turning forces. There is not much point in having masses of seed pods if all they do is crash down into the mud. Lots of short stems with only a few pods might give a better display. In any event either greater strength to the flexuous stems is required or selections need to be made where the leaf density is such that they support the seed pods in an elevated position. This latter approach is one which I have been following recently. In many cases the leaves of *I. foetidissima* elongate after flowering and these can form the basis of seed pod support. The leaves of 'Moonshy' for example, lengthen from 20-25 ins to some 35 ins after flowering and while not preventing the pods from arching and dipping do tend to keep them off the ground.

It is normal to think of the seeds of *I. foetidissima* as being orange-scarlet. When immature they are cream white gradually changing as the season progresses through yellow, apricot to orange to scarlet and even to pillar box red in some forms. Ultimately in the latest stages the red darkens to a deep crimson brown and finally black. If the capsule opens early as in 'Moonshy' then the initial seed display will be apricot and the seeds will be visible as they change colour and the period of interest prolonged.

I obtained seed from the white seeded form from Anne Blanco White. The original clone is reputed to have been found near Bridgwater, Somerset by Mary Shedden. Two healthy white seeded plants of *I. foetidissima* now decorate my garden. A yellow seeded form also exists but unfortunately is not known to me. From the known seed colour progression and the existence of forms where the colour changes are arrested, e.g. white, yellow, it is not beyond the bounds of possibility that forms could be obtained running the whole gamut of the presently existing colours.

Here in Somerset this native plant flourishes as I have never seen it before. In one or two small woodlands on the grey clay overlying blue lias cliffs on the northern coast of the county *I. foetidissima* grows as thick as bluebells, seedling populations infinitely variable and of interest all the year round. Happy in sun or shade, wet or dry, heavy or light soil, acid or alkaline. There is even a beautiful variegated form. Generally this will not set seed. In most of these plants the reproductive organs are incomplete or absent. In 1983 I obtained 3 seeds from a variegated plant in Hilda Goodwin's garden. Since the variegation is chimaeral I am almost 100% sure that if these seedlings develop they will be totally green.

Since *Iris foetidissima* is the only species in the series it could be thought that the potential for hybridization is poor — think again and look what has been accomplished with *Iris ensata*, the Japanese iris. Already in

*I. foetidissima* the colour range is greater, and it is thoroughly evergreen and it has colourful seeds and it grows anywhere that is not too cold for it — we've only just begun!

*This article was first printed in the Year Book of 1983 and Cy has kindly given permission for me to include it here in the Review.*

## **The Plant Finder 2011**

Some more name changes in *Iridaceae* in the next *Plant Finder*.

The RHS Advisory committee has decided to follow Goldblatt and Manning in *The Iris Family: Natural History and Classification* (2008) which Edwin reviewed last year in the *Year Book*. The following changes will be made:

*Afrocrocus* to be split from *Romulea*

*Cypella* to include *Phalocallis*

*Freesia* to include *Anomatheca*

*Hesperantha* to include *Schizostylis*

*Iris* to include *Belamcanda*, *Hermodactylus*, *Pardanthopsis*,

*Moraea* to include *Galaxia*, *Gynandiris*, *Hexaglottis*, *Homeria*

## **How Green are You?**

### **Brita Carson**

Every paper, TV and gardening publication is now asking the reader the same questions. Are you carbon friendly? Are you walking everywhere? Are you recycling all your waste? Are you taking more care of the environment? Are you growing for Nature? Have you remembered to provide natural habitats for wildlife before doing an autumn clearance?

In fact an article in the January 2011 magazine of the RHS, *The Garden*, has scorned this myth by saying that wildlife prefer to choose their own winter quarters. They did a survey, I'm assuming among the owners, of hedgehog boxes, lacewing chambers and ladybird hotels only to find that the wildlife are perfectly able to find their own homes, the little darlings.

If you notice a little cynicism, it stems from the wildlife totally ignoring my efforts to be kind to them. We are very proud of our red squirrels and the number increased from one to three in two years only to return to one this year. They get a superb variety of recommended foods which, for the last three years, has kept them looking fat and well fed. Most of the time as soon as they have eaten their fill one, assumed to be the female, would take the excess peanuts and bury them in any part of the garden that she found easy enough to dig. Special iris plants versus squirrel. Well they do give endless hours of enjoyment, as many a visitor has declared, so they dig where they like and I'll need to make a new bed for *ensata* seedlings. Now the worry is what happened to the other two. Have they gone to find new territory and mates? That is okay, but my fear is that the buzzards got them; there were five buzzards at the last count, circling above, making their cawing noise which would make anyone run for cover. Five of them must need a lot of food but not my squirrels who have cost me a fortune eating their way through many bags of peanuts. But the population of rabbits and mice has been reduced so this is one to my side.

And we have crows which I had trained the dog to scare away by barking at them until the farmer told me that crows attack buzzards to protect their nests with chicks in them. And so the crows stay and greedily eat the smaller birds' food. That is one to the wildlife's side.

Then there are the blackbirds and my raspberries. Not a harmonious combination. The fruit cage is carefully embedded with wire mesh but with invisible holes large enough for them to get in but they can't remember how to get out and, after ranting at them for a bit, I have to open the door. And then there are sparrows who enjoy nipping the heads off crocuses but, oh dear, their numbers are reducing in the wild so we mustn't do anything to scare them away. As soon as the pheasants hear the start of the shooting season they adopt the garden as a safe house and then do endless damage to seedlings. Their squawking soon alerts the dog who dutifully chases them but with that "do I really have to" look on her face.

Now I've complained before about my killer clay that takes years off my life every time I spend a few hours digging it. So I'm betwixt and between about the new wildlife that arrived after a spell of drought last summer. He came from the adjoining field in search of water in the pond. He burrowed in with ease and then did a bit of criss-crossing. I tried the trick of mothballs popped down holes where his tunnels were. This was all in the flower border and really, I have to decide, is he stealing all my worms, dislodging the roots of all my precious plants or would I rather set him to work digging up the killer clay. So meantime this mole stays because trying to exterminate him might be difficult.

So what about the insects. Well there are all the usual flowers that bees and butterflies like and I even look for single over double flowers wherever possible. The garden is heavy with perfume for most of the year. I have all the colours under the rainbow to suit everything, even moths, but do I have to put up with all these caterpillars eating the leaves? It appears that I do if I want the finished products fluttering about the place.

Swallows have their special quarters, which is unfortunately my potting shed. So the door stays open, I suffer their strong aroma and the constant dive bombing when I'm attempting a quick in and out. The bats were here before us and, of course, they must stay. It does mean, all summer long, the windows cannot stay open after dark or you see more of them than you bargained for. However, there is much mirth watching husband attempting to stop their circuit training and get them outside again. They should devour all the midges that the swallows leave behind so why are there still enough to bite me if I stay out gardening too late in the evening. On the bright side there would be a lot more if they weren't here.

On my side are the frogs and I dug them out a pond. The rewards are lots of frogs so I dutifully leave them to eat up all the slugs but it is noticeable that they leave plenty to perpetuate the slimy population. But they do appreciate my efforts by hiding in the depths of the water amongst all the irises. My dear family gave me a frog house for my birthday which I'm not sure that I appreciated and in spring I'll see what the frogs thought of it.

I grow organically, well not completely, but I don't use many pesticides, herbicides or fungicides until I'm really desperate and then, enraged with Mother Nature for taking over my patch, I seek retaliation. Where has the Circle of Life gone? Everyone is supposed to eat everyone else, die and return to the ground and fertilise the soil. This isn't happening and the odds are not stacked in my favour and there aren't enough of them on my side.

So when they ask, I can reply "yes" to all of the questions because I'm a gardener and I wouldn't dream of hurting the wildlife or destroying the environment but I get great satisfaction from squashing a slug; annihilating the underside of a leaf full of caterpillars and swatting every daddy-long-legs that comes my way. And yes, watch out all you moles who don't work your socks off. I am a tough taskmaster and not as green as you think.

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My sincere thanks to all the contributors of articles and photographs for this edition of the Review. Please do get in touch if you have something to say and would like to write for the next edition.





*I. munzii* © Kathleen Sayce



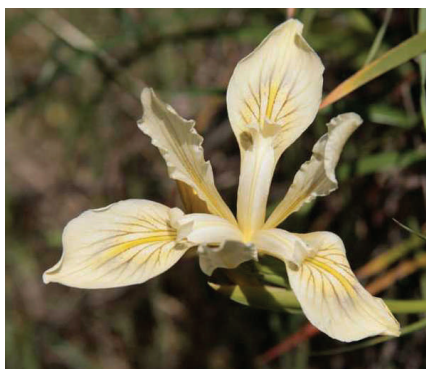
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An example of a Banner Valley hybrid. © Kathleen Sayce