



# The Group for Beardless Irises

Issue No 22 WINTER 2025

*Misange*  
541



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## Cover photographs

**Front Cover** - a period postcard signed Mésange, French c.1910

**Inner front** - Louisianas from Peter and Pam Jackson, see p12

**Inner back** - Siberians of Olga Well, see p30

**Back Cover** - *Iris fulva* by G. E. Cassidy from a postcard by the Thought Factory, Leicester, but © The British Iris Society

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## Editor's Notes

Alun Whitehead

Welcome to our beardless review of 2025. We are very pleased to have contributions from a wide range of interests.

It is good to see the ingenuity and enthusiasm of Denise Durham in growing *I. ensata* in Wales; we look forward to hearing more about the new seedlings. There is a very colourful contribution from Peter and Pam Jackson on their work in Australia with Louisiana irises. They would like you to have a go - and what more enticement can there be than those exciting colours. Nearer to home, The National Collection of Spuria irises has now moved to Eltham Palace and we learn more about this from Head Gardener, Aron Clay. A visit is clearly needed.

I am deeply grateful to Jill for doing 'everything' and still finding the time to produce an article on winter flowering irises. As you will see from the front cover, I enjoy glimpses of the past and you will find a few I stumbled across during the year, including a couple of stills from an 'adult rated' movie from 1934! That must be a first for the *Review*.

I also came across a VHS recording of the iris episode from Geoffrey Smith's *Flowers of the World* produced in the 1980s. Despite its age, there may be copyright issues as Geoffrey Smith only died in 2009, so it won't be for general download. Despite the quality, it remains a treasure for iris lovers and I am happy to share a digital copy with anyone interested for educational purposes (for their use only). The film *Autumn Crocus* mentioned later is generally available and is out of copyright. If you can't find a copy, then just let me know, I can share that as well.

I wish you a thoroughly floriferous 2026 and if any news of beardless or Iridaceae comes to you, please do share it with us.

### Diary Dates - BIS Events 2026

Wed 18 March	Webinar 'Siberian iris and their history in British Gardens' by Pamela Ferns, NC Holder
Sat 14 Feb	Early Spring Show RHS Wisley
Sat 25 April	Late Spring Show RHS Bridgewater
Fri-Sat 15-16 May	Iris event at NT Sissinghurst Castle
Sat 30 May	Summer Show RHS Wisley
Sat-Sun 19-20 Sept	AGM Weekend



## Ensatas - Growing in Wales

Denise Durham

I garden in West Wales at a height of 270 metres where we get a lot of windy, wet weather. I grow various types of irises, but the ones best suited to my situation are the Siberian and Ensata irises.

I bought my first Ensata irises on a visit with the W&MIG of the BIS to Gobbett's nursery some years ago. I'd never seen any before and was rather taken with them.

We have a man-made pond in our garden and I thought they would look nice planted around it, even though I was aware that the growing conditions wouldn't be as good as a natural pond.

They do look lovely, and the situation suits them as we receive plenty of rainfall, but have well drained soil. They remain in the ground all year round and don't suffer from problems with winter wet as a lot of my plants do. Then my husband decided that he wanted to build a garden railway around the pond. So no space to plant any more Ensata irises! I had by this time sown Ensata seed from the BIS seed exchange and bought a few more plants from nurseries. So where to put them?

My solution was to use two old wheelbarrows. My husband supplied me with timber planks which I place inside the wheelbarrows to form a platform on which to place the pots. This works very well for my plants as the varying level of water seems to suit them. I've never had to water the Ensatas kept in pots, although this summer I

had to adjust the height of the platform on which they stand. In the winter I take the pots into a cold greenhouse and keep them just moist.

I am sure that I will find somewhere to plant my extra Ensata irises before too long, but in the mean time two wheelbarrows full of the large sized flowers of Ensata irises is a delight to behold. (photo p4 & 5)





'Ranpo'





'Tub Tim Grob'



'Vodopady'



## A Window to the Past: Press Release by Walter Marx 1961



**NEW** Japanese iris introduced by Walter Marx Gardens, Boring, Ore., are (from top) Silver Waves, with 11-inch blooms of pure white; Velvet Canopy, a six-foot red beauty, and Dark Drapery, of ruffled deep purple.

Current advancements in Japanese iris are demonstrated by these Merhigo Iris introductions by Walter Marx Gardens of Boring, Ore. (top to bottom) SILVER WAVES, largest double pure white to date, 11-inch blooms carried on 4½-foot stems; VELVET CANOPY, smooth giant growing up to 6 feet in height, and DARK DRAPERY, most heavily ruffled deep purple flower on 4-foot stems.

IN DEALER  
APR 1961  
PURE DA



## Eltham Palace - new home of the National Collection of *Spuria* Iris

Aron Clay, Head Gardener

English Heritage holds the National Collection of the *Iris* series *Spuriae*. This collection has recently been moved from Belsay Hall, Castle and Gardens in Northumberland, to Eltham Palace Gardens in South East London as it was felt this site could offer a better home to these plants and offer a better representation for visitors to view this collection in the historic Iris Garden. The plants are laid out in 40 x 4m, west-facing display bed and used as an underplanting to some woody plants such as *Prunus* 'Tai-haku', and *Acer davidii*.



Eltham Palace is situated approximately 14km away from the centre of London as the crow flies. It is a former royal palace and childhood home of Henry VIII. It fell into disrepair around 1650 and was used as farm buildings until 1828, when it gained the attention of Sir Robert Smirke who devoted his attention to repairing the Great Hall. Additional gardens and glasshouses were built, as well as a separate residence in 1859 called Eltham Court. The great hall was used by tenants of this residence as an indoor tennis court and party venue!

Along with some above-ground archaeological remains, some walls and a tunnel, the great hall is all that remains of the former medieval palace today.

Around 1933, Eltham Palace caught the attention of Stephen and Virginia Courtauld, who were looking for a semi-rural estate close to London to build their dream home. Working with designers, architects and engineers such as Seely and Paget, Thomas Mawson and Partners and Rolf Engströmer, they immediately purchased a 99-year lease from the crown and set about building Eltham Palace as we know it today. A state-of-the-art, 1930's Art Deco mansion, married with a refurbished 15th-century great hall, with under-floor heating! (A blessing during wreath-making workshops in November, run by the gardens team.)

After WWII broke out, the Courtaulds left Eltham Palace, and the remainder of the lease was signed over to the Royal Parks who used the site as training grounds and offices until the early 1990's. The palace and surrounding grounds are now managed

on behalf of the Crown by English Heritage, who set about restoring it circa 1995, to a condition and representation of how it may have been seen during the Courtauld period.



Encompassing the palace is approximately 19 acres of gardens, predominately laid out as Arts and Crafts gardens. Features include a Sunken Rose Garden, Garden Rooms, formal herbaceous borders and a 1,000m<sup>2</sup> water-worn limestone rock garden with cascade (under restoration). The site also houses 5 acres of parkland which is now one of the 100 designated Kings Coronation Meadows, which also contains some beautiful trees such as the county-champion sycamore.

The Courtaulds were very well connected, millionaire philanthropists, who were also keen plantspeople with a very keen interest in plants and horticulture. They regularly entertained an audience with individuals such as John Gilmour – The Assistant Director, Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew (1931-1946) This makes up part of the reason for the move of this National Collection.

The area that now houses the fore-mentioned National Collection, was the former site of Stephen and Virginia Courtauld's Iris Garden circa 1936-1944. This has recently undergone the final stages of completion and is planted up with a herbaceous and subshrub layer. Among several beds of Siberian iris cultivars planted

en masse, included in the herbaceous layer are some less common Irises such as *Iris wattii*.



Eltham Palace is open 7 days a week during the peak season and is free to visit for English Heritage members.

Do check out the website for opening times and further details:

<https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/visit/places/eltham-palace-and-gardens/pricesand-opening-times/>



## Autumn Crocus

Alun Whitehead

When I spotted a pamphlet entitled *Autumn Crocus* I just had to have a look. It turned out to be the programme of the 1931 play by Dodie Smith (under the pseudonym C. L. Anthony). It seems very daring for the day; a single schoolmistress who falls in love with a married hotel owner in the Tyrol whilst she is on holiday. It was performed at the Lyric Theatre and extra seats had to be installed as it was so popular.

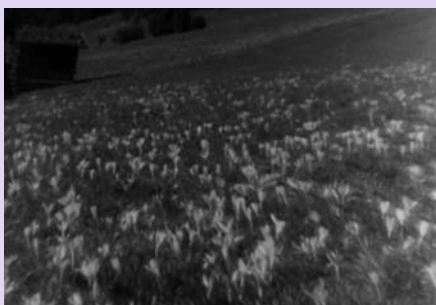
The original cast included Fay Compton and Francis Lederer, but what really pleased was the nowadays politically incorrect cigarette advertisement in the programme.

If you want to see it, a time machine won't be needed as it was developed into a film in 1934. It definitely didn't sound my cup of tea, but we duly watched it to catch glimpses of a favourite flower.

And did we see *Crocus*?



Yes, very well spaced *Crocus*, probably made of paper. But if you are patient and wait for the last clip ... there are real plants en masse moving in the breeze.



"OF course I couldn't smoke if it affected my throat or voice. ... That's why I always smoke CRAVEN "A" ... I know they will not ... and I like them better too."

20 for 1/-

● On Sale at all Bars throughout this Theatre

**CRAVEN "A"** CORK-TIPPED VIRGINIA CIGARETTES

MADE SPECIALLY TO PREVENT SORE THROATS. Carveras Ltd. London

## A Window to the Past: Press Release 1941

### Crocuses cheer a war time London



Only the soldiers in uniform remind one of war as Londoners enjoy the warm sunshine in St. Regent's Park, where the crocuses by the lake blossom forth in full glory to announce that today is the beginning of Spring. **MAR 20 1941** (Daily News-Wide World photo.)

## Developing and Growing Louisiana Irises in Australia

### - Our personal observations and experience

Peter and Pam Jackson

Why not consider growing some Louisiana irises in your garden? They are easy to grow, very forgiving on conditions, and very rewarding in the bloom season.

For those who are new to or considering growing Louisiana irises, the main differences between Louisiana iris and tall bearded iris are: (1) Louisiana iris have signals, not beards; (2) Louisianas prefer more acid to neutral soil and grow and flower best in water. However, they can be grown in gardens, but must be kept well-watered.

They reach a height of from approximately 60cm to over a 120 cm. One disease problem sometimes is leaf rust, which occurs in spring when there are overnight frosts and when too much chemical fertiliser is applied in spring.

We grow them in pots, sitting in ponds. They are planted in late summer through autumn, using good quality potting mix, some cow manure and slow release fertiliser or *camellia/azalea* fertiliser. We top with sugar cane mulch, or if available you can use old pine needles. This helps to suppress weeds, and prevents scorched rhizomes in summer sun. In very hot climatic conditions partial shade or filtered sunlight could be advantageous.

### Origin, Species Location

Although there is a vast array of Louisiana iris hybrids, there are currently five recognised species of Louisiana iris and as the name suggests, they originated in the US state of Louisiana around the Mississippi delta and southern Georgia, and in the coastal swamp areas of Texas and Florida.

The species of subsection *Apogon*, series *Hexagonae* are:

*Nelsonii*: *I. nelsonii* is only found in a small area in Abbeville in the state of Louisiana. They were known as Abbeville Reds, or Giant Fulvas. They are a stable cross of *I. fulva* and *I. giganticerulea*.

*Fulva*: These are usually red to copper red, sometimes there are yellow variations.

*Giganticerulea*: Have trouble pronouncing the name? *Giganti* means big, *cerulea* means blue, hence big blue. Some have been known to grow 6ft (1.8 metres) tall.

*Brevicaulis*: Low growing, late flowering lavender-blue, with snake like stems. Some slight pubescence on signals.

*Hexagona*: Blue-lavender in colour. Very hard to find in Australia.





*I. nelsonii*



*I. giganticaerulea*



*I. brevicaulis*

There are likely more species in existence, but these have not been officially recognised and documented. One that is unofficially recognised is *Savannarum* (Prairie Iris).

### **Collecting and Documenting ssp.**

Before 1925, people from around New Orleans noticed wild flowers in a variety of colours growing in swampy areas and bayous. They collected them and grew them in their gardens without knowing what kind of plants they actually were.

In 1925 Dr John Kunkel Small, curator of NY Botanical Gardens, was travelling across southern Louisiana, and from the train window saw these flowers. He was so impressed with the wide variety of colours in these plants, he returned to collect some of them.

He did this with other botanists and enthusiasts during the period from mid-1920s to early 1930s, identifying and photographing them. The stable species were then named. Imagine them wading through swamps keeping an eye out for alligators and snakes, stuffing the rhizomes into sacks.

In recent years, many areas of species were destroyed by storms such as hurricane Katrina in 2005, and more recent severe weather events. Land development has also reduced the growing areas. Introduced water weed is another problem.

There are several ongoing rescue and replanting programs to save the species in the USA.

### **Early Hybrids - US**

Since the 1930s growers began hybridising in a large way with the species. This led to a variety of flower forms.

Some US hybridists were:

Joe Mertzweiller, who worked on developing tetraploid LAs. Caroline Dorman, W B MacMillan (discovered *nelsonii*), Ira S Nelson, Marvin Granger, Sidney Conger, Frank Chowning (hybridised 'Ann Chowning' in mid 1970s). In 1977 'Ann Chowning' won Mary Swords DeBaillon Award, the principal award for LA iris. Later there were Mary Dunn, Dorman Haymon, Kevin Vaughn, Patrick O'Connor, Ben Hager, Joe Ghio and Charles Arny.



**'Ann Chowning'**

### **Hybridising in Australia**

Hybridising louisianas in Australia began in about the 1970s, as far as we know.

John Taylor – First to hybridise using some US varieties such as 'Clara Goula' (Charles Arny). Arny sent some rhizomes to John Taylor, and he played a large part in developing new varieties such as 'Dural White Butterfly' and 'Koorawatha'.

Also hybridising in Australia were: Bob Raabe, Jo Tunney, John Betts, Janet Hutchinson, Heather and Bernard Pryor, Don Grieves, Craig Carroll, Peter Jackson.

### Goals

My goals originally were to produce some good red varieties, also darker purples and blues. Also, to improve bloom substance and ruffling.

I feel I've produced some improved reds, including 'Moomba Flare', 'Crowned Royal', 'Glass of Red', and particularly 'Fire Warning'.



'Glass of Red'



'Fire Warning'

Blues include 'Lake Jindabyne', 'We Are Sailing', 'Coorong Breeze' and 'Southern Skies'.

Darker ones include 'Currant Delight', 'Tasman Whirlpool', 'Ruffle of Spring', 'All Suited Out', 'Deep in Thought'.



'Southern Skies'



'Tasman Whirlpool'

As hybridists will acknowledge, variations from goals will occur, and you just have to



see how the variation would work, crossing with something else. Some are worth pursuing.

In my case these included colours, patterns and forms. I've been particularly pleased with varieties with veining, substance, edging, ruffling, and different signal patterns.

An earlier hybrid of colour variation was 'Snap Frozen'. Since then, we have had 'Swirlygig', 'Lime and Soda', 'I Can Pirouette', 'Glorious Guava', 'Hot Zone', 'Girls Night Out'.

Some interesting variations in patterning are shown on 'Marshmallows Please', which is also ruffled and veined. 'Berry Frieze' has interesting colour variation from cream to blue-pink outer band on petals. It also has veining which forms the signals.



'Marshmallows Please'



'Berry Frieze'

Hybrids with distinctive edgings include 'Cherry Delight' with fine rim edge. 'Adelaide Artistry', a peach pink that also has bright gold signals is set off with gold styles. 'May I Please', a very ruffled purple, with heavy gold signals and a green throat, also has an edging showing reverse petal colour. 'Sweet As Candy' also has ruffled styles.



'Adelaide Artistry'



'Sweet as Candy'

Varieties showing distinctive veining include 'Coorong Breeze', that also has a pretty

green gold edging, and green on the styles. 'Desert Etchings' has extensive red-brown veining that finishes just before the edge of the gold petals. 'Glass of Red' has distinctive veining on the standards.



'Desert Etchings'



'May I Please'

Varieties with eye-catching signals that have been commented on include: 'Cooking Up a Storm', 'Tasman Whirlpool', 'Crowned Royal', 'Destination Robe' – signal smaller, but distinctive, 'Adelaide Sunset', 'Ruby Vision' has a very distinctive signal, also fine line edging. Also, 'Fire Warning', 'Hot Zone', 'Electric Storm' show interesting signal patterns.

Many early hybrids reflected the species open form, but I wanted to work on rounded and overlapping form, and improved petal substance. Several examples are 'Tasman Whirlpool', 'Ruby Vision', 'Wimmera Gold' and 'Desert Etchings'.



'Cooking Up a  
Storm'

Apart from feeding and watering, Louisiana irises are relatively low maintenance, fun to hybridise – why not give them a go?

## **Dutch Iris 'Autumn Princess'**

Alun Whitehead

Your first thoughts when you see 'autumn' in an iris name is to think about rebloomers. Unfortunately, in this case, no, this is not a new line of reblooming Dutch iris. It was named for the autumnal colours, a pleasant russet brown with a yellow centre which is quite pleasing. Like most new varieties, the temptation is to buy some and try it in the garden. Luckily for us, RHS Wisley had already done this in their Alpine beds.



However, the above irises were still on their first blooms. The next clump wasn't so



pleasing. They were on their second blooms, but the first hadn't died back yet; the result was very messy. If this was on a show bench, you would pinch out the dying bloom, but in the garden you would not expect to have to dead head Dutch iris. If this is a wide spread trait, it makes you wonder why it was registered! Perhaps they are better behaved elsewhere, let's hope so.

## A winter flowering iris – what a joy!

Jill Whitehead

What a start to our iris year, the *Iris unguicularis* started flowering in mid-November and they are one iris that really seems to have benefitted by the long hot dry summer. It is not just here in the Welsh Marches that they are producing more blooms than normal, others have reported the same. The species occurs in the Eastern Mediterranean area including Greece and Turkey. It also occurs in North Africa, particularly in Algeria, hence why sometimes it is known as the Algerian iris. *Iris unguicularis* is a very variable species over its range, particularly the size of its leaves and has given botanists and horticulturists much to debate over the years. But work by Aaron Davis and Stephen Jury from the University of Reading has given us a taxonomic review, using pollen characteristic, chromosome numbers and other criteria. They examined over 200 herbarium specimens from different herbaria and also grew a number of plants at Reading. This gives us a valuable insight into the series Unguiculares, which contains just three species, *unguicularis*, *lazica* and *cretensis* but some sources list this last as a subspecies. (see *Botanical Journal of the Linnean Society*, Volume 103, Issue 3, July 1990 A taxonomic review of *Iris* L. series *Unguiculares*.)

The name refers to the claw like base of the perianth segment, as unguiculus is a small nail or claw. It was first named by Abbé Jean-Louis-Marie Poiret (1755–1834), in his two-volume *Voyage en Barbarie*, published in 1789, however it is still often known as *Iris stylosa*, an incorrect name as that was first published by French botanist René Louiche Desfontaines in 1798. There are many who would prefer the taxonomical incorrect name of *I. stylosa* including Dykes writing in *The Gardeners' Chronicle*.

"The worst feature of this iris is its name, and it is indeed unfortunate that Desfontaine's name *I. stylosa* is thirteen years junior to Poiret's uncouth appellation, and cannot, therefore, properly be used. Moreover, the name *stylosa* is eminently suited to the plant, for it is one of the very few irises in which the style rises undivided for some distance above the top of the perianth tube before branching into three. However, *I. unguicularis* has many redeeming features, except, perhaps, in the eyes of those who garden in a cold, wet clay, and have not a warm, sunny corner against the house, where the addition of plenty of old mortar rubble to the clay would probably make this iris quite happy. When it does well it rewards us liberally for care in planting, for it is a joy to watch its buds unfold and open indoors in the warmth on a cold winter's day, and a large, well-established clump is quite capable of producing a hundred flowers at intervals between November and April. One of the most curious features of this iris is that, as a rule, scarcely any stem develops, and the flowers are only thrown up on a long perianth tube, six or more inches in length. The



consequence of this formation is that the ovary is well protected from all but the severest frosts in its shelter at the base of the leaves ; indeed, in old-established clumps numbers of decaying capsules of seed may often be found deep down among the growths”.

I find it incredible that this was written in 1911 and is still so current, it shows above all else the importance of Dykes' work and how relevant it still is today.

Who introduced it to Britain? It is claimed to have been introduced to Britain by the Honourable and Reverend William Herbert (1778–1847). Herbert was a polymath, he had an interesting career as a poet, classicist, politician, clergyman and authority on bulbous plants. He corresponded regularly with several notable horticulturists including William Jackson Hooker and contributed both text and illustrations to *Curtis's Botanical Magazine*, of which the 1839 volume was dedicated to him. Its first appearance in *Curtis Botanical Magazine* was in 1869 with an illustration by Walter Hood Fitch and text by Joseph Dalton Hooker. In his text Hooker notes it as “a very beautiful and sweet-scented spring flowering iris, for which the Royal Gardens are indebted to Mrs. Bodichon of Algiers.” Barbara Bodichon, née Barbara Leigh Smith, (1827-1891) was an artist and educationalist, also a leading mid-19th-century feminist and women's rights activist, chiefly remembered as one of the founders of Girton and Bedford Colleges and a friend of Getrude Jekyll. Barbara and her husband, Eugene alternated



Barbara Bodichon



Watercolour by Gertrude Jekyll

between her house in Sussex and his villa on the outskirts of Algiers where she filled her days with painting and philanthropic work. During the winter of 1872-3, Gertrude spent five and a half months with her friend in Algiers. In *Wood and Garden* (1899) she recalled her plant rambles in search of *Iris stylosa*: “What a delight it was to see it for the first time in its home in the hilly wastes, a mile or two inland from the town of Algiers!” In a later article for *Gardening Illustrated* in 1932, Gertrude explains further about her joy in finding this iris growing in the scrubland behind the house. “They never grew in strong tufts, but almost in single roots, generally against one of the many knobs of rocky stone that rose up through the reddish soil.” On her return



W. Fitch, del. et lith.

Vincent Brooks Day & Son, L.

*Iris unguicularis* Plate 5773 {published as *I. stylosa*} (1869) by W. Fitch

home, she ordered 100 roots of this iris to be delivered to Munstead Wood, which she then planted in various patches around her garden. She painted the iris in 1882, this painting is in the collection of her work in the Godalming Museum.

But over the years many different cultivars have been listed, some no longer available and some so similar that it makes you wonder if they are just named for commercial reason. For example *Iris unguicularis* 'Alba' and the variety 'Bowles White'. *I. unguicularis* 'Alba' was found and collected by Rev. Edwyn Arkwright before 1888. He came across it whilst out riding with his sisters, in a more wild area, just one plant, which as far as I can establish is the parent of those offered today. Edwyn Arkwright (1839-1922) was from Herefordshire and curate of Holy Trinity Church, Twickenham, London. A keen horticulturist, who spent much of his life in Algiers, where he found this iris. It is described as 'falls white with a greenish-orange-yellow median stripe', so how does this differ from 'Bowles White'? The RHS gives



Paul Furze - *I. unguic. Alba*

both names as unresolved, some sources treat the name as synonyms and others list them as separate plants. Certainly, the images I have seen show great similarities. Although, I cannot find a reference to Bowles actually naming this iris, in the 1950 *Year Book*, Rex Spender says that Bowles has a good white form. I also believe that Bowles gave a plant to Cambridge Botanic Gardens and from there it went to Graham Stuart Thomas under that name, but he was not sure whether other white forms were in cultivation. Then, there are also white forms of *Iris unguicularis* subsp. *cretensis* one named by the late Bernard Tickner of Fullers Mill. He named it 'Bess Tickner' after his wife who spotted it on their visit to Crete. This plant flourishes at Fullers Mill, a garden that is now looked after by the charity Perennial and is a delight to visit at any time of year. But similar to this iris is also a form found by Peter and Penny Watt which was distributed by Robin White of Blackthorn Nursery, the only difference seems to be more yellow on the base of the standards. Dr Jack Ellis also found a white form of *I. unguicularis* var. *augustifolia* which was originally distributed as 'Alba' but the research by Davis and Jury found the two irises to be different, so it became 'Greek White', described as having a greenish-orange-yellow stripe on the white falls.

Although, it seems that Bowles may not have named his iris 'Bowles White', he was extremely fond of the unguic's having first come across drifts of them at La Mortola, Italy on his first visit abroad in 1889. He joined his brother Henry and his new wife,



E. B. Anderson

who was known as Dolly. The garden was created by Sir Thomas Hanbury and his brother Daniel, it was a mecca for botanists then and still is now, but this was a social visit. Bowles describes the visit in his book *'My Garden in Spring'* (1914).

"Sir Thomas Hanbury parted its forelock of long leaves and displayed a mass of lilac blossoms and then and there I decided I must grow it and grow it well". It was obviously 'love at first sight' and in fact Bowles chose *Iris unguicularis* as his favourite plant if he had to choose just one to grow. The Hanbury Botanic Gardens are now managed by the Genoa University. Bowles managed to find a source of some plants and from there he did not look back, giving us great detail on how to grow and how to pick for the house in his volume based on Spring in his garden at Myddelton

House. It was from reading this book many years ago that I first found out that you pick the flowers rather than cut them. Bowles describes several forms which he grew and I can imagine his delight when he received a very pale lilac form from his good friend E B Anderson. Edward Betram Anderson (1885-1971), was often known as 'E. B' or Betram to his friends, he was a founder member of the Alpine Garden Society as well as being a British Iris Society member. An exceptionally keen plantsman with an eye for spotting a good plant, as was Bowles.

Two *Iris unguicularis* are associated with Anderson, 'Mary Barnard' and 'Walter Butt'. *Iris* 'Mary Barnard' - this was collected near Algiers by Mary Barnard of Honiton, Devon who gave a plant to John Gray. John gardened in Suffolk and in his day was a well-known artist, mainly portraits but also landscapes, as well as being an extremely keen gardener. He was great friends with Anderson and Bowles, growing a good number of snowdrops as well as many other plants and was known as 'Jock' by his friends. He painted a portrait of Bowles in 1945 and they often exchanged visits and I suspect plants, which is how 'Mary Barnard' came to be in Bowles possession. Anderson registered this iris in 1962 and it seems that Mary collected it in 1937.



'Walter Butt' © Christine Jarvis



*Iris* 'Walter Butt' - Although Walter was a great plantsman, we know very little about him. Most of the information can be found in *The Galanthophiles* by Jennifer Harmer and Jane Kilpatrick. From this we can see that Walter was born in 1880 to Reverend Walter William Butt and his wife Fanny Beatrice. Walters' grandfather was a wealthy man with considerable lands near Cheltenham, building Arle Court which of course Walter would have known. Walter's father was an antiquarian and exceptionally keen botanist, who collected his own herbarium specimens. This herbarium was donated to Gloucester Museum by his son. So Walter, must have had a love of plants in his veins! The first major garden that Walter created was at Hyde Lodge in Chalford, Gloucestershire. He gardened there for 20 years, he cleared and planted the 3 hectare site himself and obviously just loved plants from the smallest snowdrops to the greatest trees as he amassed a considerable collection. As this became too much for him, he sold it in 1947 and soon the garden became extremely well known because Walter's extensive collection of snowdrops formed the start of the Giant Snowdrop Company, which really was the forerunner of the snowdrop sales we know today.

Walter Butt moved to Porlock in Somerset and bought a house called Bales Mead with a smaller garden, it was next door to his good friend Norman Hadden. E B Anderson visited Norman often and usually that visit included a look round Walters garden. On one occasion he noticed a fine pale form of *Iris unguicularis*. On enquiry, Walter said that a friend had found it near Algiers. Of course in the true spirit of gardeners, Anderson was given a piece which in turn went to E A Bowles, who admired it greatly. Eventually Bales Mead became Anderson's home as Walter moved on. Anderson felt that this iris was special and deserved a name, hence it became 'Walter Butt', he registered it in 1962. It is a very pale lavender form with a strong scent and quite a large flower.

These two are perhaps the most commonly grown but there are several others which are certainly worth a closer look.



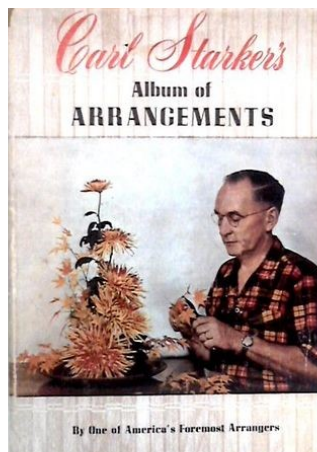
'Peloponnese Snow'

*Iris* 'Peloponnese Snow' – This is a relatively new form of *I. unguicularis* and it has proved to be a vigorous plant, often looking tidier than some other forms. It was found by Fritz and Josefa Kummert in the northernmost Peloponnese in what is often described in stony meadows, introduced under his number J&FK 0124. Fritz, a renowned horticulturist proposed the name and a piece was given to Robert Rolf in the UK in 2009, which he divided and sent to two nurseries. So you can see that it has done well quite quickly. On a recent internet search, I found

seven nurseries selling it although the current RHS *Plant Finder* list slightly less, it does however, appear occasionally at the BIS Early Spring Show in February and GBI members have been known to exhibit it in the BIS Virtual Shows. (image 6) It is best described as having broad white flowers with lilac-blue markings and an orange flash, held above rather than within the evergreen foliage. Valued also for being of being highly scented as in the following quote from Keith Wiley when asked to describe/recommend winter flowering plants:

“Hardy or near hardy, winter flowering iris are not thick on the ground, and this one is the standout selection of a species that has filled this gap. The more-often seen cultivars are various shades of lilac-blue, which may or may not have much scent and can be reluctant to produce many flowers. By contrast the beautifully marked white flowers of ‘Peloponnese Snow’ are not only strongly scented but are also produced prolifically for several months. Worth watching out for slugs eating the soft flower stems and flowers.”

*Iris* 'Starker's Pink', although this was registered by Phil Edinger in 1999, it was originally distributed by Carl Starker in the 1950's and described as a light orchid pink. Carl had a nursery and garden in Oregon, USA and had a keen interest in irises as well as in flower arranging, known as the leading person in this art at the time. His catalogues show the variety of irises that he grew and he was always keen to obtain new species. Images of his arrangements were used in the 1950 Schreiners Iris catalogue and also in his 1954 book *Album of Arrangements*.



*Iris* 'Abington Purple' this was registered in 1993 by Richard J. Blakeway-Phillips. It is a deeper purple than 'Mary Barnard' and was awarded an Award of Merit by The Royal Horticultural Society in March 1991. The Reverend Blakeway Phillips gardened at Clun in Shropshire, he was a keen snowdrop enthusiast who exhibited at RHS shows and named several varieties after family members or places where he found them. So perhaps 'Abington Purple' was found at Abington in Cambridgeshire. Some sources say it was 'discovered' by Richard Nutt. It was in Richard Nutts garden in Buckinghamshire in the 1980's that I first saw *I. unguicularis* flowering in profusion. It certainly appears on the BIS show benches today and the first reference to it being shown was in 1999 by Christine Skelmersdale, being much admired then.

*Iris* 'Bob Thompson' was found by its namesake in Crete prior to 1979 as he registered it that year and it appeared in Washfield Nursery catalogue soon after, describing it as a "Small free-flowering form, with flowers of an even darker blue

than ‘Mary Barnard’ in early spring”. Broadleigh Gardens also grew it and it was given an Award of Merit by the Joint Iris Committee in 2004. It has obviously stood the test of time as I see that several nurseries still list it.

*Iris* ‘Marondera’ was found in Harare, Zimbabwe by Chris Ireland-Jones, near where he went to school, it is larger than the species and slightly darker and seems to be a real ‘toughie’! Chris, of course is well known in horticultural circles as he was the owner of Avon Bulbs until very recently. Along with the late Alan Street, they created many ‘mouth-watering displays at both the RHS Westminster Halls and RHS Chelsea, winning 30 Gold Medals just from Chelsea! On a visit to the nursery in 2019, I saw rows of unguics growing in a cold greenhouse, just to give them a little protection ready for dividing for sale.

*Iris* ‘Kilbroney Marble’ arose in a garden in County Down, Northern Ireland and was



‘Kilbroney Marble’  
© Fern Harden

distributed by the Slieve Donard nursery. This nursery was a highly influential and famous plant nursery that operated in County Down from 1904 until it closed in 1975. ‘Kilbroney Marble’/ ‘Kilbroney’ was registered in 1991 by Enid Burgoyne but it does go back some time, first note in a *BIS Year Book* was 1977 and it is certainly very distinctive in appearance with its marbling on each of the petals. In 2009, Beth Chatto had a variety growing near to her house in a sunny corner which she called ‘Palette’, there were also plants for sale. Of course we had to have one but our very heavy clay and quite shady garden was not the best place

for it. But to my mind it was very similar to ‘Kilbroney Marble’, but maybe slightly paler and less marbling? Unfortunately, it is no longer listed.

*Iris* ‘Oxford Dwarf’ – I am not sure if this is a form of *I. unguicularis* or *cretensis*, Brian Mathew suggests the later due mainly to its size and also because it looks very similar, if not the same as plants he has seen growing in the wild in the Peloponnese. I think it may have originated at Oxford Botanic gardens as the specimen growing at RBG Kew had that as its source. The foliage is grass like and the whole plant is quite small. From reports that I have read, I understand that it is not as robust as some other forms and may be best grown in an alpine frame.



‘Palette’ unregistered



HERB. HORT. WISLEY (WSY)

*Iris unguicularis* Poir. 'Oxford Dwarf'

*Iridaceae*

Cultivated and collected by Jim Marshall, Ipswich.  
Description/comments: Plant given to Jim Marshall by Brian Halliwell, Assistant  
Curator Herbaricum & Alpine Dept. Kew c. 1982. Thought to have been given to  
Kew by Oxford Botanic Garden. Possibly a form of *crenata*. Leaves narrower  
and less plentiful than most *unguicularis*.  
Pressed by Sarah Cooke

2<sup>nd</sup> March 2014

Sheet 1 of 1



There has been various irisarains who have looked into unguics and successfully bred quite a number. One of these was Charles Bedbrook, who detailed the results of his work in the 1962 *Year Book*. He started crossing a white form with *I. cretensis* and from the resulting seedlings one stood out as it was clear pink. From further crossing he obtained eleven seedlings showing shades of pink flowers, two of which went before the Joint Iris Committee and received very favourable comments. It was not all success though as he had difficulty in getting some seedlings to flower but he took the advice of Gwendolyn Anley, ie seedlings and transplanted plants need copious watering until established and that increased his success rate. He obviously continued experimenting, taking a small piece of one of his unguic's and placed the root in water. Fleshy roots appeared and by February the following year it was in flower. I would love to know the outcome of this work, as it seems that we have so much to learn. So far I have not found any other references but it is interesting to note that his grandson, Graham Rowles is now growing irises in America and has written briefly about his grandfather, so another avenue to follow up! (see *Roots*: Journal of the Historic Iris Preservation Society. Volume 37 2024)



'Dazzling Eyes' © Richard Tasco to

Several cultivars were raised by Edith Cleaves of California in the 1970's. Often they had a 'Winter' prefix, ie 'Winter Mystery', but these no longer seem to be available. Currently, there is a some breeding work taking place in the USA, by Richard Tasco. He is perhaps best known for creating award winning tall bearded, median, and arilbred irises. However, he has been working with *I. unguicularis* since 1998 when



'Lavender Moonbeams'  
© Superstition Iris Garden

he made his first cross. This was *I. ssp cretensis* x 'Marondera'. From this cross he registered his first *unguicularis* introduction 'Dazzling Eyes' (2004). 'Marondera' has proved to be a very successful parent and he has used it extensively in his breeding work. One of his goals has been to get large flowers with large round petals, one resulting cross with 'Marondera' x 'Mary Barnard' gave 'Wishmaster' (2007) which has large medium purple flowers. Another goal has been using 'Alba' to create a very pale lavender along the lines of 'Walter Butt', but much

larger. ‘Lavender Moonbeams’ (2014) was the result. Others have been registered with his latest being ‘Winter Snowbird’ (2025) and on average he grows about 600 seedlings a year!

As far as growing is concerned, perhaps it is best to remember the advice from two past ‘great’ gardeners, firstly Vita Sackville West “Kindliness, so far at the Algerian iris is concerned, consists in starving it. Rich cultivation makes it run to leaf rather than to flower..... Sun and poverty are the two things it likes.” And E A Bowles comment “The older the clump the better it flowers”. Plants are easily propagated by division, but don’t divide too small, the best time being while the roots are live, white, and active. Remembering that if newly planted or divided, the iris will need moisture until it has got its roots down. Also much debated is the advisability of clipping back foliage before flowering, some growers advise this but others suggest that the foliage protects the buds from frost and a gentle tidy up of dead leaves is all that is needed, as well as keeping an eye out for slugs! And finally, do remember that the seed capsule will be found almost hidden amongst the foliage, ie. very close to the ground.

Happy iris growing!



© Ken Walker from the SIGNA website

## Olga Wells

Alun Whitehead

Olga died earlier this year, but she leaves behind a wealth of colourful irises and good memories. There is a formal obituary in the *Year Book* - this just looks at some of her beardless irises.

Jill & I first met Olga at one of the BIS Shows and what sticks in my mind from those earlier years was the magnificent floriferous displays of 'Martyn Rix' she brought along.

It was about this time Olga registered 7 Siberian and 1 spuria. 'Atlantic Crossing' came from seed donated by Currier McEwen to the BIS seed exchange. Even on our



'Martyn Rix'



'Atlantic Crossing'

heavy clay soil, it can rebloom usually about September. 'Wealden Butterflies' was awarded an AGM in the RHS Iris Trials in 2008, but my favourite remains 'Wealden Mystery' with it stunning markings (see inside back cover).



'Wealden Butterfly'



'Kent Arrival'



In 2007 the Kent Group organised a BIS Convention in which Olga was involved and it gave us all a chance to see her allotment. As you can imagine, bearded irises predominated, but it was interesting all the same.



Probably it is best to end with some photos of her irises which can still bring us much joy.



'Sutton Valence'



'Wealden Canary'

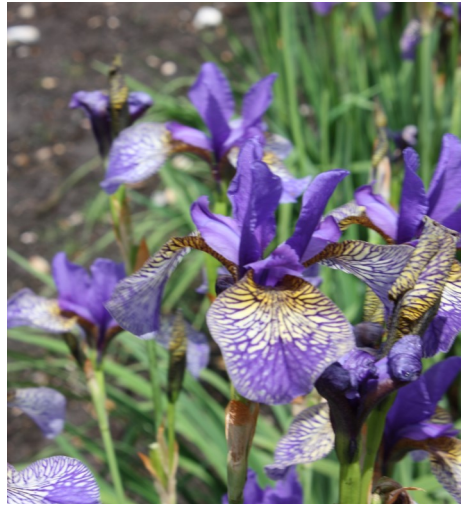


'Wealden Skies'



'Wealden Delight'





'Wealden Spires'

'Wealden Carousel'

'Wealden Sunshine'

'Wealden Nocturne'





*Iris 'Wealden Mystery'*



*Iris 'Wealden Summer'*



