

THE NEWSLETTER

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Beardless Irises For All New Members

Officers of the Group

The Group for Beardless Irises

Issue No. 6 Spring 2010

Editor's Notes
Brita Carson

The Big News—we are now live. You can tell all your friends that they can join the Beardless Iris Society for FREE by simply going to

www.beardlessiris.org

All the *Reviews* and *Newsletters* for the last few years can be read online. Gradually more photographs of iris flowers will be added e.g. the Siberian Iris National Collection and also members' own photographs. More publications will be included as we get permission to put them online.

We are trying to change, keep up to date and move forward to encourage new members and younger members to join. Everyone can help by telling as many young people as possible about the site which has information on all aspects of growing irises successfully. How often do we say "if only I had started to grow irises sooner" But how do we make them start sooner?

It is so commonplace for all ages to look online for information they want. I now know the difference between rat and squirrel droppings which was a great help in my potting shed. It is much easier to keep out squirrels than rats. (By the bye a very helpful site might be comparedroppings.com if anyone felt like starting such a site, particularly useful for those of us who have moved to the country!)

We would like to be added to anyone's Links on their website if you would like to get in touch with Alun. If you have a garden or iris nursery to advertise we could include you on our Links.

Lots of possibilities but as always we could do with some new enthusiasts to join us on the committee with their new ideas. First and foremost we need a new seed distribution officer who loves growing plants from seed. Read Madeleine's job description if you are interested in taking on the task. We don't have committee meetings, we simply do everything by email.

I'm afraid we are late getting this newsletter out because there is so much to do outside. I am still planting up my garden while organising and writing out plant names for lots more Siberian irises that Jill and Alun brought me for the Collection. I had a visit from the local Plant Heritage Group (formerly NCCPG) and the Chairman suggested that other members might like to take up a Collection but they could choose one that has a lot less entries in the Plant Finder. A Collection requires the holder to grow 75% of the entries.

This year it was a relief to see the garden change from all over dull brown to forty shades of green or in my case a good deal more than forty shades of Siberian blue. The severe winter has killed a few plants that I thought would survive but then others have survived much to my delight. And, in my book, a space in the border is always an invitation for a new plant. Look for two other invitations further on in this newsletter.

www.beardlessiris.org

Alun Whitehead

In the last *Review*, it was announced that a new category of “**web member**” would be created. As you probably remember, this type of membership is **free**, but the member receives no hard copy publications or correspondence and has no voting rights. No objections were received and so this type of membership is now available to all. In fact, we welcome our first web member, Terry Johnson from New Zealand, who is well known for his historic iris blog (<http://historiciris.blogspot.com>)

The new website was almost completed before the irises started to bloom, but customer demands increased and time to devote to the website vanished. However, in its present state there is still plenty of information to appeal to any iris fan. In the autumn, we hope to add another publication from W.R. Dykes and also to start including copies of the older, pre-*Review* Newsletters which once formed the only publication of the Group. These will of course also be on the CD.

Another step forward has also been made in that payment to the Group can now be made by **paypal** using the email address: **sales@beardlessiris.org**. This will make it easier for members outside the UK to pay for seed orders and to pay their subscriptions.

As always, we welcome all members and encourage contributions which will now be assured a wider audience than ever before possible. This is a great opportunity to share our passion and interests with the rest of the world. If you would like to get actively involved, the Group is always interested in improving and on the lookout for enthusiastic people to join the team. The Group has the advantage of being small and flexible – so if you want to take part but don’t think you can fill a particular role – please don’t be put off. Having said that, we are in need of a new seed officer - so please email Anne, Brita or myself if you are interested. Our thanks go to Madeleine who has done such a good job, but whose time is now limited when the seed distribution becomes most active.

Chairman's Note

Anne Blanco White

I owe an apology to Brita, and all of you, for not having left a note for her to add to the previous Review. Misguidedly I assumed that I should be back in sufficient time, but I was wrong. And my thanks go to Jennifer for filling the gap so nicely.

Sadly, our enthusiastic Seeds Officer, Madeleine Bullock, would like to stand down because she has too much else to do at the same critical time of year. We urgently need a replacement and if anyone feels this is something they could do at the same time as acquiring an international acquaintance with whom to discuss the problems of raising plants from seed then please get in touch with Madeleine. Her address is with those of the other officers and she has given a more detailed explanation of the work. I think that both she, and Margaret Criddle, would say that the post offers really interesting problems and solutions.

And while we are on that subject, associations such as our own are always looking for ways to expand their membership and their range of activities. If anyone out there has ideas about what they would like to see the Group doing – please would they get in touch. We're always open to bright ideas that offer chances of "fresh woods and pastures new" to explore.

The Group itself is in good operating order thanks to Brita's enticing publications and Alun's work with the website and photographic records. And the seed sales have been satisfactory.

Carry on gardening.

This has been an interesting winter though I observed most of it from the other side of the world. Even in London there was fairly serious snow and very hard frost. My South African irids are not happy little plants in general, though stray bulbs parked in the planters with *I. japonica* 'Variegata' have flowered as has *I. tuberosus* (syn. *Hermodactylus tuberosus*) in the same situation. I grew those plants from seed years ago and this is the first time any have flowered for me. The young rootstocks were fascinating three or four years later when tipped out of their compost; they varied from what appeared to be ordinary reticulata bulbs to small tubers. The other plants are in pots and it seems clear that it needs a good root run so the non-flowerers will be evicted to a flower bed to do or die.

In general, my more valuable species seem to have survived the snow and frost in good form and may even flower – one or two? One sufferer has been *I. tridentata*. It has always been regarded as tender in this country, but I wrapped up the pot in bubble-pack and parked it in a larger container for extra insulation and then put the whole thing well back under the plant stand for protection. I knew if I brought it indoors there would be a major outbreak of greenfly. Most of the plant has survived, but I think it won't flower. One offset which hadn't bothered to root has been planted up separately. Some of the Evansias are looking distinctly tatty, but are leafing up and flowering surprisingly well, one oddity being EN 3151 (not EN 1351 as I mistakenly put in the seed lists). This plant flowered late last summer, but has been so shocked by this winter that it is flowering now in April! One major problem is that Evansia seedlings are weeds just like the *Somnifera* poppies. And there is a definite outbreak of *sibirica*-like clumps around the place. Goodness knows what they actually are since I lost as many labels as plants when moving here and given a promising seedling I park it somewhere. With luck at least some of the spurias will flower and let me identify them and evict what I don't want.

If your snowfall melted and was promptly followed by a hard frost there is a real risk that the leaves of the *Unguicularis* will have been killed off and evergreens do resent such treatment. Don't, if you were fond of the plant, go and dig up the remains now. Scatter something like Growmore over the area and then add a gritty mulch. A dusting of low growing annual seed won't do any harm to fill the gap. Apart from that stand back and wait until the autumn. Then in September, water well if the summer has been dry. There is a much better-than-even chance that the plant will recover. The point is that unguics are slow movers and tend rather to pile layer on layer of rhizomes. If the top layer has been killed off there will almost certainly be a lower layer still able to take over. And it had been a good autumn for these plants. 'Walter Butt' got mixed up with a foetidissima and another plant, but fought back and has flowered splendidly. As did Lawrence Ransom's 'Fée d'Hiver' and an old species form. Indeed they all made the effort to flower again in February, so now all we can do is wait and see what the summer will bring.

Secretary's Report
Madeleine Bullock

As I've decided to relinquish the role of Seed Distribution Officer for the GBI, Anne has asked me to put together a "job description" for a successor.

The GBI Seed List covers species and hybrids of beardless iris and we are lucky to have very loyal contributors in the UK, USA, Canada and Europe. The Seed Distribution Officer collates offers of seed and produces the Seed List; collates and stores the packs of seed; sends out seed orders and banks the proceeds. Developing the list is also very fulfilling - the list is pretty comprehensive but there are some weak areas and contacting growers to beg for seed is part of the role. It is good to have the knowledgeable support of Jennifer Hewitt, who checks the list for errors.

Access to email and the ability to produce lists on a computer are essential and you need to be organised and methodical.

The person who takes over will enjoy growing irises and may know a little (or a lot) about them. I knew little about irises when I took over and it is a really good way to learn.

Do contact me if you would like more information – madeleine@madeleinebullock.co.uk. I'm happy to help anyone who wants to take over.

I know from the notes of thanks which accompany your seed orders that the Seed Distribution is much appreciated by members of the Group so let's hope that someone would like to take this over. I'll be carrying on until we find someone else as I'd like the Seed Distribution to continue, so don't forget to save some seed this year to send.

Louisiana Challenge continued

Mark Haslett

This winter has certainly tested the hardiness of the Louisianas that I'm growing here in Essex and with no special protection they have experienced some really hard frosts and have been covered in snow. Despite this, unlike my other bog irises which have died back, the LAs continue to grow away. I have spoken to some growers in the US and they have had even tougher weather in parts of Louisiana with some record-breaking frosts. The plants thrive on this and still keep growing.

I am transferring some of the plants to two new ponds we put in over the winter which have been filled with pure rainwater, and I will be experimenting with feeding to see how this affects the plants. The pond and pool ones are being fed on waterlily feed and Osmocote pellets. I will also try other fertiliser pellets and liquid feeds to see how the plants do.

I intend to try to grow some on a flood and purge system where the plants will experience a water table that rises and falls over the growing season to see how this affects them and if, in fact, this benefits them. And continuing my bucket and Balconnière technique I will report more of my results in the next *Review*.

In the States the Iris is sometimes referred to as Louisiana ditch weed because it so common in the roadside ditches of its native Louisiana. What a lovely weed to have.

I would love to hear from other growers of these interesting irises; how they grow them; their experiences and which cultivars flower best for them.

A Day Out in Dorset

On September 25, 2010 there will be a rare opportunity to hear talks from two of our National Collection holders at Puddletown near Dorchester:

Malcolm Pharoah is the Head Gardener at Marwood Hill Gardens which holds the National Collection of *Iris ensata* and *Astilbe*. As many members will know, this garden was planted by the late Dr Jimmy Smart and is a beautiful oasis offering the chance to enjoy a wide range of plants collected from across the globe in a stunning setting as well as viewing its two National Collections.

Known to the Aztecs as the “jaguar flower”, *Tigridia*, the Mexican tiger flowers have a striking colour range. Add to that the extensive range of *Sisyrinchium* and we are promised a treat by Edmund Heaton who holds the National Collections.

The day is being organised by the BIS. Booking in advance is essential as places are limited and are open to non-members. Tickets are £15 each which include a buffet lunch as well as tea/coffee on arrival. To book, please make your cheque payable to *The British Iris Society* and send it to Clive Russell, Yard House, Pilsdon, Bridport DT6 5PA or email: clive_russell@yahoo.com if you need further details.

At the end of the day, the BIS will be holding its AGM. This is open to all BIS members, but please note only those with tickets will be able to attend the talks – so make sure you book yours **now** to avoid disappointment.

An Invitation to Everyone

Everyone is invited to an Iris Day on June 11, 2011.

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.

There will be lectures with tea and coffee in the morning and afternoon, and a buffet lunch.

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. Decide on likely candidates this year, pot them up and hope for flowers at the right time next year.

It is hoped 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.

More details will be included in the *Review* but make a note of the date now, June 11, 2011.

Prices will be as low as possible but any small profit will go into the GBI funds.

It will be great to meet fellow enthusiasts - see you in June 2011. Please send/email your details if you are interested.

Jill Whitehead
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A Warm Welcome to all New Members

Brita Carson

The Iris family is enormous with a long list of species most of which have been hybridised to produce thousands of cultivars. It can be confusing to read gardening catalogues that don't have enough space to provide a lot of cultural information. To buy plants in flower from a nursery is like a child in a sweetie shop deciding which sweets to buy, but with a little more knowledge buying from either a catalogue or online has the thrill of anticipation of beautiful blooms to come and can be a lot cheaper and save time.

The first easy division, to simplify the iris family, is to separate the irises with beards and those without and although we promote all irises, our Beardless Group concentrates on the ones with no beards. Perhaps they should be listed by the degree of difficulty to grow but it is more positive to say they are all easy, which they can be, with a little help. We hope that we can provide plenty of help from the specialist members listed on the back page.

All plants appreciate some feeding to encourage good growth and good flower production and each food supplement could have an optimum time for application but a little general fertiliser in spring and a little autumn feed for the roots satisfies the majority of irises without unnecessary complications. The best time to pamper the new plant is when it is planted. Add well rotted manure or homemade compost or shop bought compost mixed with the soil and a little fertiliser like "Growmore" when planting to help the plant get off to a good start. Overfeeding is expensive and will only encourage a lot of leaves and fewer flowers.

Siberians are probably the easiest of all the beardless irises to grow and although they flower better in sun they can still flower in shady conditions. They will put up with almost every type of soil but ideally like some form of moisture-retentive compost added to keep the roots cool and damp in long dry spells, particularly on a light sandy soil. The roots are clump forming and the plants are happy to be planted among other plants to shade their roots. (Bearded irises grow from a rhizome which generally sits partly exposed on the soil surface and needs sun to develop next year's flowers.) Avoid splitting the clump into single segments because each segment will take a long time to become established into a large enough clump to flower freely. Buy and plant as a clump with at least 4 or 5 pieces intact. After a few years the clump will need to be lifted and split discarding the old centre for the new young vigorous growth.

Siberians are extremely graceful plants with narrow leaves and either small delicate flowers or stronger larger blooms giving a more powerful presence in the border. They can be short and dainty at 40 cm tall with 8 cm flower heads or can be as high as 120 cm with flowers up to 15 cm. Colours range from all the possible shades of blue, wine, yellow and creamy white and all the colours between them with more styles, patterns and sizes being introduced every year. The falls (“down petals”) have become wider, wavy and nearly horizontal and the standards (the “up petals”) shorter, smaller but wider until some newer hybrid flowers have 6 falls instead of any standards.

Siberians are often labelled as *I. sibirica* ‘Cultivar Name’ or simply as *I.* ‘Cultivar Name’ which doesn’t make it easy to decide to which species it belongs. Siberians have been divided into 2 main groups according to their chromosome count. “Siberian” is the term used for those iris which have 28 chromosomes and includes 3 species - *I. sibirica*, *I. sanguinea* and *I. typhifolia*. Due to the original mistake the descriptions and names were mixed up and it was actually *I. sanguinea* that came from Siberia and not *I. sibirica*. All three species in this group hybridise very freely and today, apart from those collected in the wild, it is not really correct to name most cultivars *I. sibirica* when it probably has a bit of everything in it.

“Sino-Siberian,” (the correct term Subseries Chrysographes) is the commonly accepted name given to the species with 40 chromosomes and these include *I. chrysographes*, *I. forrestii*, *I. bulleyana*, *I. clarkei*, *I. delavayi*, and *I. wilsonii* and usually have a species name included on the plant label but they also hybridise easily and probably have mixed ancestors so can’t always have an accurate species name. Their cultural requirements are very similar to Siberians but they may be a little more temperamental. The flower size is smaller with narrower leaves, more arching and even more graceful. *I. forrestii* and *I. wilsonii* are a pretty shade of yellow and *I. chrysographes* varies from mid blue to almost black.

Generally Siberians don’t suffer from many pests and diseases except the usual slugs and snails. Rabbits don’t like irises although young rabbits may nibble young leaves that look like grass until they learn sense. They can cope with exposed sites, are very hardy putting up with severe cold but can take lots of sun and hot temperatures too although preferring plenty of rain rather than drought.

Siberians are the best irises for new gardeners to grow and a large clump will reliably flower every year for a couple of weeks although individual flowers only last three or four days depending on the weather. There are early ones and later flowering ones so by having several varieties the flowering period can last for six weeks or more. Beautiful.

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Proof Reader

As always my sincere thanks to Jennifer Hewitt for proof reading the Newsletter.
