

THE NEWSLETTER

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Officers of the Group

The Group for Beardless Irises

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Editor's Notes

Brita Carson

If only I didn't have to comment on the *bad* weather. Enough to say the rainfall has probably broken all records and this hasn't been a good summer for gardening. The weeds are like many a waistline - out of control. Not that I over-fed them. The "June drop" certainly did, bringing down lots of tiny apples, taking the heads off many of the roses and damaging the flower heads of the Siberians. But those living in the southeast were probably delighted to see rain after suffering a hose pipe ban in spring due to a dry winter.

I was unable to go to the 90th Birthday celebrations at Wisley and to give you a report so Jill Whitehead has very kindly written the following report for me.

"The BIS celebrated its 90th birthday with a weekend at RHS Wisley at the beginning of June. The GBI, along with other groups, was invited to mount a display about ourselves, giving an opportunity to show not only other BIS members who we are, but also the general public. The display was based around our members, past and present, and their irises, which enabled us to show a range of irises as well as the value of the GBI seed exchange. To compliment the photographs there were cut spikes of a number of irises including, 'Cleedownton' and 'Bournemouth Beauty'. This created a great deal of interest in the breeding work of our members and questions were asked and answered. Past *Reviews* were on show, which generated several favourable comments, especially as ours is the only BIS group, at the moment, which offers on-line membership. We also played the latest CD on a continuous system, which folk seemed to enjoy watching. Often the public are under the misconception that the BIS is only about bearded, although Brita is always careful to include a good range of different irises in the *Year Book*. She is really following on from Dykes. He was the first editor of the BIS and in the inaugural *Bulletin* of 1924, he made the following plea -

...'In putting before the members of the Iris Society, and of the public, these four papers by experts on the cultivation of Bearded Irises, I feel that attention ought once more to be drawn to the fact that there are Irises other than Bearded Irises, and that there are among them many beautiful garden plants, which are in danger of being neglected...'"

The usual weather conditions for your area along with the type of soil should dictate which species of iris would suit your garden but thankfully we aren't all so sensible. If you have any examples of growing difficult species in your garden it would be very interesting to other members to read about them. I'm sure Dykes would have approved of us pushing the boundaries so that no iris species is neglected.

Comments from the Chair

Anne Blanco White

This has definitely not been the best year for any kind of irises though members did manage to produce surprisingly good spikes for shows. Generally speaking seeds have not been set and if the plant tried, the pods quietly rotted. One plant which I hoped to send for trial not only had to contend with a violent thunder shower, but with a pigeon which seemed to have collapsed on it. I may be able to save it, but doubt if I shall be alive for the next trial slot. Well, it was a pogon.

But the plants of the year on this patch have been the spurias. They have grown since I moved here, but have shown a marked reluctance to flower in any reasonable quantity. Well, we do say they are plants of water meadows and this year mine have made it very, very clear that they want to be properly flooded even as late as April. At all events I am now sure which are for the chop and several must go since I need their space. A putative *lilacina* and a *danica* have flowered as has a good *spuria* (I think). Dr Rodionenko's 'Frygia' did well. The throw-outs were cultivars which I didn't really want in the first place and which I didn't mean to bring here anyhow. The other wetlanders have not done so well. They took umbrage during the very early 'summer' and the buds cooked in their spathes. Those that did manage to flower were of variable quality. Some of the flowers on a spike were badly affected by rain about when they first showed colour with the actual petals streaked, shrunken and misshapen while flowers which opened during fairly fine weather were of normal quality. At least I now know that the plants I hoped were Tony Huber's 'Enfant Prodige' really are; it has a charming flower.

Then there was a bit of fun with potted plants which proved untrue to name, or at least the labels in the pots, and as I couldn't recognise them they have gone. We have a system where we can put out garden rubbish and the recycling collection will remove it. So I parked these plants in the bag and one of them, a pseudacorus, had the flowers showing. A mother, collecting her children from the school bus, noticed it. It was sheer luck that I saw her. She looked very carefully, pulled it out and subjected it to further inspection – there was good root development – and then hiked out the second. Both were taken away and I just hope they will grow well for her.

Hybridisers and the BIS Website

The BIS website has proved very useful for one extensive group of beardless irises. Last year Lech Komarnicki of Poland sent over some copies of a booklet he had written, in Polish, for iris growers in central Europe. It looked very interesting and he was persuaded to translate it into English. It is on the website now, indeed has been for some months, and if any of you haven't seen it, I do recommend it. The number of possible and successful

crosses that he has listed, and in some cases illustrated, is of great interest. Many of the combinations he gives are ones that would normally be ruled out because nobody thought they would work.

The chromosome count is the main guide, but the actual genes make most of the difference when it comes to such hybridising. Think of the early calsibs. *Iris* 'Margot Holmes' for instance back in the 1920s. Amos Perry must have spent a lot of time before he succeeded in raising it. There were odd ones before the real influx started in the 1950s and now they are common both in diploid and tetraploid forms. And hybridisers from around the world have produced interesting crosses. Remember that the first generation may not produce anything really spectacular and may even be sterile. In that case it is important to use tetraploid plants which often have better fertility. You are unlikely to find the garden overwhelmed with seedlings, but some should germinate and there is real excitement when the first one fattens its buds and gradually unfolds its flower.

Iris foetidissima

This species has now been shown by the workers at Kew to be closely related to the *Series Spuriae*. Most of you will have noticed that the leaves of many of the spurias, species in particular, have the same smell as those of the foetidissimas. Indeed, Dr. Rodionenko placed them very close together some decades ago. The trouble here is that there are at least two groups of spurias and so it will be necessary to find out which, if any, will cross with a foetidissima and the spurias have a very wide range of chromosome counts. Hybridisation is known between *I. graminea* and *I. foetidissima*. The plants produced appeared just to be a rather smaller foetidissima which was a little disappointing and as no photos seem to have been taken, let alone colour ones, we don't know what colour the flowers were. But the clear implication here is that foetidissima was the pod parent. So it is time to get started on making the foetidissima flowers a little more garden-worthy: the falls do tend to strappiness. I could never understand why people had been so enthusiastic about Miss Lindsay's form which always seemed horrid to me. It may have been because it was an early recognition of a yellow flowered form as opposed to the usual old gold and lilac.

A "GUIDE TO SPECIES IRISES"

The paperback version of this book, edited by the Species Group and issued by Cambridge University Press, is now available. There have been a number of new discoveries since it was first issued and the pictures are in black and white, not colour, but it is still a useful guide to the very wide range of species forms. And although there are a surprising number of missing chromosome counts even today, those provided are a guide to what may or may not possibly be hybridisable. It is available from Amazon

and any good bookshop around £25.00. ISBN 978-0-521-20643-3

***Iris unguicularis* 'Starker's Pink'**

When this plant arrived in this country back in the 1970s it was an elegant shade of true rose pink and totally different from any of the other forms. These days any plant going by that name is as likely as not to be a conventional blue. There are two things I would dearly like to know: does anyone have such a plant with a good history behind it? What is known as an impeccable provenance? Or have you seen a really pink unguic. during winter garden visits? Does anyone have a really good photograph of a plant from those days? Mine is poor.

What seems to have happened is that when it arrived here it set seed on a fair scale, but it was all open pollinated with the help of the usual form. Naturally, the first seedlings tended to be blue and those that weren't were poor shades of pink. Since this plant had been discovered in N. Africa it cannot really be blamed for having failed to survive the British climate and there probably wasn't a lot of it around. Mind you there are some nice blue plants around, but they are not 'Starker's Pink' nor, come to that, 'Walter Butt'.

Don't Forget - Seed for the Seed Exchange Alun Whitehead

The seed exchange is a valuable resource for members. It provides endless interest and fascination watching the magic of seeds germinating and growing into plants. The flowers that follow give a special thrill after waiting a year or two for them to flower but it is well worth the waiting. You hope that each year of seed sowing will produce flowers better than the last. However this resource depends entirely on the generosity of you all and we all know how generous gardeners are. This wet year, above all years, we will need your support as it looks as if it will be a poor harvest in the UK at least. So please save seed and send it to Janet Miller, our Seed Officer, who is ready to receive any quantity of seed, no matter how small an amount.

Not all iris seed is worthy of keeping especially if you want to keep cultivars true to name, so now is the time to remove all these seed heads. With iris seed generally being quite heavy, naturally sown seedlings will emerge by the parent plants and any strong growers may well take over. It is ironic how the worst weeds in an iris bed are irises themselves as they are so difficult to spot. If not removed soon enough, they soon look like a bona fide member of the border. The worst culprits are *Sisyrinchium striatum* and *I. pseudacorus* whose seed seems to survive composting.

However the seed heads should ripen fairly soon and if they are picked and put into paper bags they will dry out further (remove the spathes to stop earwigs hiding inside.) Please send seed to Janet Miller, Westwind, Main Road, West Keal, Spilsby, Lincs PE23 4BE.

Who Reads our Website?
Alun Whitehead
www.beardlessiris.org

When you write for the *Review* or this *Newsletter*, you might ask who are the likely readers. Most will be from the website and for the year to date, the hits by country are as follows:

UK	4385
USA	4242
Germany	1190
Canada	1166
Ukraine	847
Japan	648
Russia	579
Sweden	561
France	536
China	403

We are always hoping for more hits and it would be encouraging to have a good following reading all the news online. However, it is not always a question of numbers. We know for instance that there is a very active group of Irisarians in New Zealand and if you are travelling in that part of the world, I am sure you will receive a warm welcome at the New Zealand Convention between Friday 8 and Monday 11 November 2013 being held at Timaru. Further details from Lynda Crossen - (crossen@xtra.co.nz)

Please send any news you would like us to advertise, to the editor. It will reach all these people who are following the website and therefore a very much larger audience than our own members.

Selection in the Potting Shed?

Alun Whitehead

It is that time of year here when all the seedlings from this year's sowings are in full growth and are crying out to be pricked out. I am sure that most of you will have no problem doing this, but I think a couple of thoughts are worthwhile. Before I start, I should explain that nearly all my iris sowings are done in a similar way; the seeds (any number up to 50) are sown on multipurpose compost in a 10cm square pot and covered with 1cm of grit.

So the first question that arises when you look at these healthy young plants full of the joys of youth is, do you have germination? A strange question, but personally the memory is not as good as it once was and I cannot rely on it to tell me how many seeds I sowed. I usually make a note of the approximate number on the label and so at pricking out time I can tell whether we have real germination or just a few of the advanced guards. If it is seed that has taken some effort to get, you may want to do some delicate pricking-out of those first few and leave the remainder in place to germinate later. If you move away from irises and sow *Sisyrinchium* where some species can take a few years to germinate, this becomes more important. Even so, some fresh iris seed can be slow.

Like many of you, I have been brought up with vegetable growing. On pricking out you take the healthiest and strongest growing seedlings and if you have sufficient, you discard the rest. I still see myself naturally wanting to do this when pricking out irises and if my breeding goals were early germination and strong growth that's fine. However, if my aim is genetic diversity, well that's a different story. I remember Brenda Hyatt, an auricular grower, saying that some of her best seedlings were some of the last to germinate. There also may be a variety of growth habits. For this reason, I try to prick out a range of seedlings of different sizes. My current interest is in restoring the colourful PCIs which the cold winter 2010/11 massacred. As these can have heights from 15cm - 80cm, diversity is one of my prime objectives.

If you only have a small number of seeds, then you won't have much choice. However, as you get more plants, you will be able to gather more seed and soon have too many. That's the time when choosing what to sow and what to prick out becomes more important. Space and time are a limited resource for all of us. Don't forget, you can always send your surplus to the seed exchange.

All online members can order seed from the seed exchange of the GBI and BIS but unless you are a paid member you will have to wait until the regular members have ordered seed.

The Louisianas
Mark Haslett

The Louisianas have done well this year and I have applied for Collection status but I'm missing two old LA varieties and it would really help me to complete the Collection's older cultivars if any member has or knows where I can buy them.

Iris x fulvala 'Violacea' and 'Dorothea K Williams'.

I would be so pleased to get these two if anyone can help. All my contact details are on the last page.

Wet Weather and Year of the Slug
Anne Blanco White

Slugs and snails. Those of you who are members of the RHS will have noted the item in the July issue of *The Garden*, p.19, about coffee as a slug killer. Well, coincidentally, I had rather surprising proof that it can work. There was a new shrub still in its nursery pot. If we had two or three fine days with a brisk wind it showed instant signs of dehydration. Then I had to go away for a few days and didn't want to risk leaving it exposed in spite of the weather forecast. So I dug it a nice little hole whereupon it rained for a couple of days. When it cleared and dried sufficiently for me to brave the garden again I went and inspected the hole thinking that the spoil might have been washed back in. It hadn't. But what was displayed was a number of corpses of slugs and snails of various sizes mostly on the spoil heaps. This is something I had never seen before so while I cleared them away I thought about it. As it happened the ground round the hole had previously been mulched over several days with a mixture of tea leaves and coffee grounds and I think the caffeine remaining in the grounds may have been responsible; there's caffeine in tea leaves too.

I have for years made a point of mulching the ground in this way round newly planted seedlings to discourage slugs. And I use a strong solution of ordinary, not decaffeinated, instant coffee for spraying on the undersides of leaves of my Evansias to discourage slugs. It helps with hostas, too. Now I wonder if it would be effective with lily beetles. And I buy the cheapest instant coffee in the largest quantities. Mind you, this isn't a respectably approved system, but for the life of me I can't see how the powers-that-would-be can stop us dumping what is simply vegetable waste on our flower beds. It may not work in your garden because when all is said and done not even the most vicious insecticides are guaranteed 100% effective.

Please let us know if you have found this effective. Ed.

Time for Match Making

Brita Carson

It was a sunny weekend when Terry and Barbara Aitken stayed for a few days on their Scottish search about Terry's ancestors. Terry was delighted to find out lots of interesting information about his grandfather in Kirkintilloch from where he emigrated to Canada. (I was also delighted for him, and could hardly believe all the information that is there waiting to be found.)

What a real treat for me to talk irises for a few days with Terry and Barbara. They employ 10 people during the summer to do weeding so they have a very large area under cultivation. Terry has a passion for orchids too which he keeps so that is another large area under glass.

An even bigger treat was to watch Terry make crosses of the Siberians from the Collection. It was a warm, sunny morning with hardly any movement in the trees. Just perfect conditions for the job. Terry uses a cocktail stick to open the stigmatic lip and very deftly gets the pollen to adhere to the end of the stick. He can make one anther full of pollen pollinate several flowers in double quick time. I had to write labels, in double quick time, to keep up with him. He must do hundreds of crosses on a good day. In Vancouver, Washington, there are many good days.

Listening to Terry it becomes obvious the number of possible reasons why a cross doesn't take. First it is essential to know whether the Siberian is diploid or tetraploid. Diploids will only cross with diploids and tetraploids with tetraploids. As a general rule more robust plants, with larger flowers and stronger stems suggests a tetraploid but there are always exceptions. Nurseries, especially the American ones, usually have dip or tet after the cultivar name.

Keeping bees, creepy crawlies and other insects off the flowers is another challenge. Here, at the moment, ordinary flies are feeding on the ensatas. I noticed that Terry didn't remove any parts of the flowers before making crosses but that would take up a lot of his time. If some opened flowers still had the stigmatic lip closed, he just used them. No chance of a possible cross was wasted. He always closed the lip after the pollination.

Some cultivars are just sterile. Again the nurseries often give this useful piece of information in the advertising description.

Is the pollen ripe and ready and has the stigma dehisced already? Lots of practise is needed to train the eye for these signs. Look for pictorial examples on-line to see the stages of your flowers.

And then last, but it could be the least problematic, is the rain. On the next two pages is my cheap method of keeping the rain off the newly pollinated flowers. In the *Review* there will be an excellent account of another type of head gear to keep off the rain by Jeff Dunlop.

To Be a Hybridiser or Not?

Brita Carson

This was going to be the year I would become a hybridiser. Mother Nature had other ideas and between her and the jet stream my enthusiastic plans will have to wait another year. But as they say “Necessity is the Mother of Invention” so perhaps I will eventually have the last laugh.



2 pt. plastic milk bottle.
Cut off, with a pair of
'not too precious'
scissors, the top part of
the bottle which leaves
12 cm depth of cover. Be
careful to leave on the
handle. The handle is
very important to give
the cover stability when
the cane is inserted.

The milk bottle upside down with the handle retained.

I have not tried the idea with 4 pint milk bottles but that would allow more room and two flower heads could be protected at the same time. It would also allow more air movement .The plastic may make it hot underneath but then I don't think I would use the cover unless rain threatened. It is opaque so strong sunlight shouldn't damage the pollinated flower inside. Again the cover can be easily removed or lifted up to allow more air inside. And the lid I use to collect the pollen and find I can grip it in the palm of my hand.



Use the point of a sharp knife to make a hole of suitable size for the top of the cane to go through. Or use a proper tool for making a neat hole.

So that it is in alignment, make the hole in the top directly above the handle so that the cane won't cross over where the flower-head will be. Avoid making the hole too large but it does have to move up and down the cane to do the pollinating and then down to cover. If it

has become too large use the elastic band trick or tape it. And canes very inconveniently do have joints which the hole has to accommodate.



“I had a headache after the bashing I got from that cover. Put me right off.” “I didn't fancy my one, he was far too blue.”

“Oh you poor things. You should have seen mine. Tall, dark and very handsome. Think he's got a Dykes. For you I'm available anytime.”

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