

The Group for Beardless Irises  
Newsletter no 13



Summer 2017

## Editor's Notes

### Brita Carson

My apologies again, I'm beginning to think this should be called *The Late Newsletter* because I get so far then things overtake me and the Siberians start to flower, at least a fortnight earlier than usual this year, and I want to be outside hybridising as many Siberians as possible for myself and the seed pool. Now in July after a really hot sunny spell that followed the cold drought conditions in early May the weather has changed into a mixed bag of everything and I thought it was going to be a bonanza year with perfect warm balmy weather which would have been kind to everyone especially hybridisers.

In this newsletter Anne reminds us to take heed of where the iris Species grow in the wild so that we try to emulate as nearly as possible the same conditions and the irises will then give their best growth and flowering. She also throws down the gauntlet to us all to grow something new.

Jill takes up this idea by talking about the cultivation of *Chasmanthe* that she saw growing beautifully in a garden and then persuaded Alun to buy some corms for her to try out herself.

As usual I'm trying to make more members into hybridisers or failing that there are some useful tips to encourage your Siberian and Japanese irises to extend their growing and flowering season to bloom and bloom and bloom again.

A possible secret for everything this time is a magic mulch so all get cracking making your own compost to use or even use grass cuttings as a last resort but at least 4 inches deep to be effective at keeping down those weeds and keeping the soil cool. There is more detail in the paragraphs after "Extended Bloom" with ideas and tips for you to try with your own plants. If you felt inspired perhaps you would like to write or email me with some results.

On the front cover is '**Madeleine Hamilton**' (Jennifer Hewitt 2002) in its extended flowering mode. Look for the full, fat seed pods beside the flower. There are two flowers and two side shoots which I hope to pollinate. They are covered with the inverted milk bottles to keep off rain and these will probably remain in position for about a fortnight. photo©Brita Carson

## **Chairwoman's Report**

### **Anne Blanco White**

This has been a most displeasing spring in London. Dark days and very cold nights. Now, into May, there are still ten plants cluttering up my window sill waiting patiently to be allowed out into the fresh air, sunshine and rain so that they can really grow properly. The nights have been so cold – around zero Celsius – that I can't risk them out yet. There was a show on April 29 and when I came to draw the curtains on the morning of April 25 there was a pretty little *I. schachtii* beaming up at me and there was no way it could be kept going all week. But this has given rise to an Awful Thought.

We do not give sufficient consideration to the conditions under which irises grew when they were the collected species in the wild. And, you should remember that breeding on any serious scale has only been going on for about a hundred and twenty years. Take the *Hermodactyloides* (*Reticulata*) group in particular and do remember that there are always exceptions to a rule especially in botany. We buy the bulbs that are sold by the garden centres and either pot them up or plant them out in a flower bed. In general they have been well fed in the commercial beds and are nice plump bulbs which flower, as they should, the following spring. But come the autumn twelve months later they are either all rotted away or miserable little objects so we throw them away either immediately or at replanting time and buy fresh ones and then we complain that 'they won't do in our gardens' or that they were infected with virus or similar.

Now they grow pretty high up in their own mountain homes. Frosts come early and in due time the ground is covered by snow which, oddly enough, insulates the bulbs from further extremes of cold. Months later the snow begins to melt, the water seeps into the soil and the bulbs leaf up until they flower. Remember how long *reticulata* leaves can get? After flowering time, the rest of the local plant life begins to grow too and those *reticulata* leaves which have to feed the bulbs up for next year lengthen so that they get their fair share of water, food and sunshine. What is more, since the frost which dries out the soil for the winter is severe, the bulbs are hauled well down to a level in the soil where they are protected from extremes of cold and heat. In fact some retics have contractile roots which haul the bulbs downwards as the leaves die.

I discovered this by chance one summer when I unintentionally dug up a clump on a south-facing slope of Weald clay. The very conspicuous white root from the middle of the base of the bulb was several inches long, a puzzle and

at first I thought it must be a food store root similar to those of the Scorpisises. Further enquiries ruled that out. Incidentally, some crocuses can play this game too and it makes them all very difficult to find if you want to transplant in mid-summer. If you want to experiment with retics in pots you will need a very, very deep pot because no iris is going to waste energy in a shallow pot where it won't benefit from getting stuck at the bottom.

Now it follows, that it is no use buying some of Alan McMurtrie's gorgeous new hybrids and assuming that they will do really well in Britain. His plants, in Canada, live under central Eurasian conditions: very cold, dry winters and hot, dry summers. Start them in pots and as you build up a good stock you can experiment with them in the garden. It's a pity not to take advantage of new developments in this field just because we haven't thought about what to do. Plant bulbs in the garden pretty deep, around 8 inches or more and if you can, put them close to the base of small, deciduous shrubs. The shrub roots will provide good drainage during wet spells in summer and some shelter against heat extremes as well. Space them out so that there is no need to replant too often, but don't risk overcrowding and disease. Heavy garden soils they don't mind because if the ground dries out the soil dries round the bulbs like insulation round an ice cream. There is a lot of advice in past *Year Books*.

And when you go to shows, or get your catalogues, make a resolve to acquire a new iris, to think carefully how it should be grown and then to do your best for it.

The BIS and the groups are functioning again so we need to display our irises to good purpose in spite of the fact that there are ominous suggestions of serious drought conditions. Remember to mulch well because it does help to keep the root runs cool.

*Ed. Guess who bought some of Alan's irises and had planted them in pots, most likely, not nearly deep enough to accommodate their downward habit. There is always plenty more to learn.*

*Alan McMurtrie is coming over in February 2018 for the RHS show and may lecture on the 13/14th February. More information will appear in the RHS The Garden and website. Check his website [www.reticulatas.com](http://www.reticulatas.com).*

## ***Chasmanthe***

### **Jill Whitehead**

Do you grow *Chasmanthe* and if so do you find it hardy? The reason I ask is I have seen *Chasmanthe* growing well at a garden in Cornwall, Lamorran House which is situated on the Fal estuary, where their last recorded frost was in 1987. I have also read about it growing in the Lake District, where Tim Longville successfully grows *C. aethiopica* in a shady position, so I was wondering if anyone else grows any of the *Chasmanthe* really well? Of course, there are three species of *Chasmanthe* but in most books I have looked at *C. floribunda* which is the one given as the hardiest. The name comes from the Greek *chasme*, “gaping” which must relate to the wide gaping mouth of the flower and *anthos*, “flower”. At Lamorran, I first thought it was crocosmia flowering, but as it was April this was obviously a ridiculous thought, even allowing for Cornwall’s mild climate. That is how it looked as I wandered down the paths in this delightful and rather exotic garden. The owners, Mr and Mrs Dudley-Cooke, have planted the slope with all manner of sub-tropical and slightly tender plants and it has been designed to have an Italian feel to it. A lovely place to visit if you are in that part of the country, with the benefit of coffee and cake served on a terrace surrounded by plants.

As to *Chasmanthe*, I would love to see the seed because according to Goldblatt & Manning they are “borne in bright orange barrel-shaped capsules”. In their native South Africa, growing in semi shady places they are pollinated by birds as they forage for nectar. Birds are also responsible for seed dispersal, which is a far more effective way of spreading seed compared with the more passive dispersal of other *Iridaceae*, and that probably accounts for their wide distribution. *Chasmanthe aethiopica* and *floribunda* are naturalised in some parts of California and parts of Australia. *C. floribunda* first flowered in cultivation in 1633 in France and all three species were grown in Western Europe in the 17th and 18th centuries.

As Alun was walking round the Malvern show, he found a bulb merchant selling corms of *C. floribunda* var. *duckittii*, so of course he couldn’t resist. Apparently, this variety with yellow flowers originated from a colony in Darling, Australia in the 1920s and was named in honour of the Duckitt family who created wildflower reserves in this area of the Western Cape. Before planting I looked closely at the corms, they are rather flattened with papery tunics. The pattern on the tunics reminded me of feathers, especially the detailed feather pattern that you see on female partridges. Very beautiful in its own right, well to me anyhow as I have a love of pattern. I wonder if

the corms will become stacks as crocosmia often do as they mature, or perhaps split to form new corms. At this rate I will have even more to look up! Now all are potted up and growing well but at the moment in our polytunnel. I love the foliage, pleated and a good bright green. The advice is that they should be planted 15cm deep in well-drained, sandy but enriched soil preferably in some shade, I wonder what they will make of our solid clay. I will plant them out next year and will do my best to improve the soil but as to needing a two or three-month dry dormancy period, they will have to take their chance with the weather – like the rest of us! So hopefully we will be able to report back on our success or failure at some point in the future but that doesn't let you all off the hook, if you grow any then please do write or email and let us know!



Pattern on the corm. ©Jill Whitehead

## **Pollination: success and failure?**

**Brita Carson**

Failure brings such disappointment. I'm annoyed when it happens but I want to find out why? Was I just too clumsy, or too impatient, or are there other reasons? I carefully wrote on the labels what the weather conditions were like so that I could assess if temperature played a vital role. I did prove and disprove a few things, one namely was that weather is not as vital a component as I had previously thought. I'm not sure about the extremes or even what temperature could be classed as an extreme which will be something else to work on next year. I now have an outdoor thermometer so more detailed records must be kept in future and it is essential to resist the use of woolly words like cool, warm and hot etc. There have been good 'takes' with all my temperature definitions but also failures so I can no longer blame the weather.

One definite improvement I notice this summer, is the promised quantity in the pods. The successful ones are completely full and bulging on all three sides suggesting a high seed count and an increase in my abilities not to damage any side of the pod. But I want to know why so many have not 'taken'. A few have looked very promising with green, healthy looking pods but before long have turned brown and started to shrivel. Can they possibly be stressed from a lack of something?

One possible reason could be my haste in not waiting until the stigmas are really receptive showing the "stickiness" on the stigmatic lip. Other possible reasons made me think it was time to check with an expert and Currier McEwen's, *The Siberian Iris*, came out for consultation. He has three methods and I use the last one which is removing the falls, the anthers and the standards. Although there isn't a landing site for the bees it doesn't stop them from landing lower down where they have direct access to the source of the nectar and in theory we should both win. I use cheap, disposable cotton buds (from the cosmetic or baby section of the supermarket) to apply the pollen, saving time cleaning paint brushes between each application. The irises are also less likely to be stabbed by me than if I used a toothpick. I have (lots of) little pots of named pollen each with its own cotton bud just ready and raring to go. However does the act of removal give rise to me damaging the styles protecting the stigmatic lip?

Currier's advice on the weather suggests that moist and cool is better than hot and dry. However I had just as much luck on my hot-dry days as cool-damp days so this is where extremes need to be ascertained in accurate temperature numbers. I think Currier will mean a lot hotter than my "hot weather" in Scotland.

To ward off the rain "the plastic milk bottles cut to sit over a cane" is still working well for me. It is also good to put in place in preparation for a future cross. It creates a moister atmosphere inside on very dry days and maintains a constant temperature. These plastic milk bottles have other uses; still stuck on canes but able to blow freely in the wind they are bird scarers, not the small birds who become accustomed to them, but the sparrowhawk doesn't like them; and at the moment they are protecting the strawberry patch but that might not be very successful knowing my blackbirds.



Plastic Milk Bottles, one drying off the flower before pollinating, and the other preparing the bud before it is open for pollination, keeping off the cold and wet.

Storing pollen is another important topic and Currier wrote about keeping the pollen dry by adding silica gel crystals which comes in many plastic and cardboard containers nowadays. I notice even the fruit trade is using them regularly for selling soft fruits. I have to admit that I keep all pollen jars, without any lids, out of direct sun but in the hot, dry conservatory with no other, special drying treatment, getting as much success with later dated crosses as with early ones. Newly dehisced pollen all goes into the same jar as I try to make pollinating as quick and easy as possible. Mixed thoroughly and then generously applied to each iris lip I'm always optimistic that each one will be a winner. What is the percentage failure rate? I don't know what is typical with other hybridisers but I am aiming for 10%, although this year it has been more than double that. Time will tell but I'll have to try harder than that next year, as they say on your report card.

Two pests have been very noticeable this year, one of which was a bit unexpected. It was the green caterpillar of the common white cabbage butterfly. I was picking them off every day as they made their way into the flower and started eating the stamens, at least solving the reason for those half eaten ones. The other pest was the earwig that I found nestling inside the spathes; a good place to hide so all the spathes were pulled down to expose the full seed capsule. They may also be responsible for the small holes bored into the seeds, another cause for some seeds failing.

However there is one result which hasn't been a success, in fact a total failure. The pollen that I froze last year did not fertilise any irises this year. Did I leave it too long before freezing? Some more pollen has been frozen for another try next year but using fresher pollen this time. When I opened the pill pot containers they were still perfectly dry inside so I'm optimistic and think it is worth trying again. I was reading through a copy of the American Iris Society *Bulletin* and came across a letter from Chuck Chapman who has had very successful results from frozen pollen. He first dried the pollen and then inserted it into little pockets he had made out of paper with the name written on the outside. He then put a few of them into a film canister with some silica gel crystals. The canister then goes into the freezer and when Chuck wants to use it he removes the package, uses what he wants and returns it to the freezer.

I would also like to send pollen to anyone who requests it next year. I was reading an article from the 1989 *Year Book* by Cy Bartlett who successfully pollinated some plants of his own with pollen sent to him by Keith Keppel.

I use the “removal method” as I call it. I wait for the balloon stage before removing the standards, falls and stamens. This way I know the flower is almost ready to be pollinated. However it is often too tempting to tamper sooner when the flower is not ready to be forced open. I should know better. When I do this I sometimes feel the slightest snap inside and think this is the main cause for that problem so as usual all my fault I need to take more care. There may be other reasons for failure that I haven’t even thought about but I’ve plenty to work on next year!

## **Extended Bloom**

I thought some people might be interested in extended bloom, not really reblooming from the same flower spikes but rather the flowering continuing, after the first show of bloom, on new flower spikes. I have to admit not everyone is interested in hybridising but I’m sure everyone would like to see the season go on a bit longer, and longer and even longer.

After they had finished flowering I fed the irises with an organic fertiliser and then hoped for good weather - sun and rain at the right time and in the right quantities! Other hybridisers (the ones I’ve read about are doing mainly bearded ones) suggest that the most important necessity is rain after the end of flowering and feeding but another option is splitting up the clumps and planting in new beds. Extended flowering takes place the following autumn on the new rhizomes. However that hasn’t worked for me so far this year unless it has still to happen.

I’m asking a lot but any rebloomers are alright by me just to prolong the iris season. Most ‘rebloomers’ should really be called extended flowering. I first read about it in an article written by Terry Aitken talking about clumps of his Siberians and ensatas (Japanese) but he has also bred lots of bearded ‘extended’ bloomers.

Anne talks about members attempting to copy similar soil and conditions as those of the species which probably applies here as well. Terry lives in Portland, Washington on the west side of the Cascade Mountains. He describes his climate similar in ways to our maritime climate with the ocean influence producing cool nights. He also has heavy rains leaching nutrients from his soil leaving it cool and wet with a pH between 5.3 and 5.8. That is quite acidic in my book although Terry didn’t seem to think so. To work out the hypothesis Terry explored another variant with a Siberian

iris hybridiser on the east side of the Cascade mountains. This time it was the temperature of the soil and here he thinks he may have found the answer. During his bloom season in May the soil temperature stayed at a steady 15 °C and extended bloom continued but when the air temperatures rose to 38 °C (a heatwave to me) and the soil temperature rose to 18 °C then extended bloom stopped until the soil temperatures cooled down again. My extended bloomers this year are 'Coronation Anthem', 'Atlantic Crossing', 'Madeleine Hamilton' and 'Prussian Blue', which just happen to be all tetraploids but there are diploids too but they are still a bit new here. Terry also mentions not to plant in a place with continuous all-day sunshine but to allow for some part of the day in shade. He uses a thick mulch to keep the soil cool. Chad Harris, of Japanese hybridising fame who lives reasonably near, keeps his ensatas flowering all summer by watering with cool mountain spring water. Think I now need a soil thermometer but I must get it sooner rather than later.

Here is another interesting idea - to plant some spare irises on a north facing plot to aim for cool summer soil. If, like me, your irises are due for a move to fresh ground why not try out this idea with at least some vigorous ones. As a bonus it will naturally extend your bloom season by flowering later than others you may have on the south side. It might also give you ideas for hybridising!!

Terry has been concentrating on his extended bloomers for years now and one of his breeding programmes aims to achieve irises in flower nearly all year round. We can all dream.

Ref. 'A Beardless Iris Rebloom Hypothesis' Terry Aitken, Oregon. *Bulletin of the American Iris Society* October 2007.

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