

The Group for Beardless Irises

Newsletter



I. sanguinea nana alba

Summer 2020

Editor's Notes

Brita Carson

This has not been a happy year for us and for anyone who has not heard we lost our Chairwoman, Anne Blanco White, on Christmas morning last year, 2019. Anne has always been the glue that has held us together time and again. She always said the right thing at the right time to inspire us and keep us in check. Anne wrote for various Iris Groups and was an authority not only on the species but on all things horticultural. Lately she was writing regularly for the New Zealand Bulletin.

I have a thought that if you would like to pay your respects to Anne, please email me a photograph of a plant or flower that reminds you of her every year when it flowers, or simply one that you like. She was always interested in all the species and especially the early spring ones. You don't have to include an article or short piece, in fact you can simply email me the photo and add your name. We will collate these in the *Review* and create a virtual bouquet of flowers for Anne. I'm sure she would have appreciated that more than anyone struggling to write. Memories are special and personal and don't need an explanation.

This does mean that we have lost our 'Chair' and do need helpers to either write for us or to find interesting articles that the members would like to read especially on beardless irises. Anne sent out the original request for someone to take on the editors job for the Beardless Group and I've been in this seat ever since. It would be great to have help to inspire our members and produce articles with ideas from your own gardening experience or request help with 'things to do'.

Website Data:

| | 2017 | 2018 | 2019 |
|-------------------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| Unique visitors | 4874 | 4020 | 4562 |
| Pages viewed | 59454 | 79820 | 39309 |
| Full downloads | 23539 | 17403 | 14723 |
| Partial downloads (=articles) | 6372 | 7909 | 4825 |

It is always encouraging for us to see how many people downloaded the Beardless publications from around the world. I try to tell myself that they are not just testing their English but are very interested in reading about beardless irises.

British Iris Society
Iris Photo Competition Winter 2020

Following the large number of entries we received for the on-line iris competition we held in May, we have decided to hold another. This show will be open to BIS members and also to members of the five BIS Groups. The classes are as follows:

Class 1. Any re-blooming bearded iris. To include bearded species. Date of re-bloom required.

Class 2. Any early or late flowering beardless iris, including Species, water iris and winter flowering varieties.

Class 3. Any type of historic iris, pre 1950.

Class 4. A garden scene which must include some type of iris/Iridaceae.

Class 5. An abstract/creative photo of an iris or Iridaceae e.g. Just the beard.

Class 6. An artistic floral display which should include irises or Iridaceae.

To enter, just choose a photo of an iris that you have grown that fits one of the classes above. It would be helpful if you can send us a photo of the whole stem and a closer one showing one of the blooms on the stem.

Three different irises can be entered for each class.

Please do not use Photoshop!

Photos must have been taken during the 2020 flowering season and not entered for any previous photo show. Photos of entries to previous actual BIS shows are not permitted. Please note this rule does not apply to Class 5.

Give the name of the varieties you are entering, unless they are seedlings.

Send your entries to info@britishirissociety.org.uk by 31st December 2020. Entries will be numbered so that they are anonymous when they are judged. In January, we will ask our BIS judges to make their choices.

Members are encouraged to view entries on the BIS website and may vote for those they favour by emailing kentirises@aol.com with name and number of exhibit.

We would like to use any photos submitted for publicity purposes, e.g. *Year Book, Newsletters*, or Facebook.

Please let us know if you foresee any problems.

Treasurer's Report

Alun Whitehead

This report covers the two years to 31st December 2019. As in previous years, some charges relating to 2018, 2019 were paid in the following year. If the £319.97 paid in 2020 relating to 2019 is taken into account, the growth in funds at the bank almost disappears. This is fine as we do not aim to make a surplus, simply if possible to avoid deficits. The overall financial position has again remained stable, however with uncertainty everywhere, it is an appropriate time to have a budget update and this will appear in the next *Review*. We must thank Janet Miller whose seed sales make a significant contribution and to all those who supported the *Beardless Iris Day* last year. The plans for our next event are on hold for the moment, but please watch this space.

Treasurer's Report

| | 2018 | 2019 |
|-------------------------------------|----------------|----------------|
| Subscriptions | 202.32 | 220.50 |
| Seed Sales | 217.00 | 221.40 |
| Newsletter Cost | -113.92 | -51.56 |
| Review Cost | -164.53 | -258.48 |
| Interest Received | 1.12 | 2.10 |
| PayPal & Bank Charges | -13.77 | -40.59 |
| Website | -85.56 | -26.28 |
| Beardless Day | 0.00 | 294.40 |
| Total: Net change at bank & PayPal: | 42.66 | 361.49 |
| Opening Total Bank Balance: | 3707.12 | 3749.78 |
| Plus net increase in funds | +42.66 | +361.49 |
| | 3749.78 | 4111.27 |
| represented by: | | |
| Closing Treasury AC Balance | 1048.52 | 1050.62 |
| Closing Current AC Balance | 2044.87 | 2170.29 |
| Closing PayPal Balance | 656.39 | 890.36 |
| | 3749.78 | 4111.27 |
| subs paid in advance | 141.82 | 191.32 |

I am grateful to Roger Norman, once again, who has kindly been our independent financial reviewer.



©Alun Whitehead with Alun's PCI sdlg from GBI seed.

A few words from Janet about seeds **Janet Miller**

It has been a very challenging year and the end seems nowhere in sight. I know that lots of you have been spending more time in the garden this year and because garden centres were closed for a while, you have been experimenting with growing from seed. There are many new rules and regulations, partly due to Brexit and partly due to Covid 19, and I have noticed the prices of plants keep rising, so this has got to be a good time to try sowing something new.

I would like to keep the seed list going and hopefully add new varieties, but unless members send in seeds, I won't be able to send them out. I would therefore be grateful to receive any Iridaceae seeds at any time but especially before the middle of October. If you are unsure of what exactly you are sending, just give me as much information as you can. On this year's list, I will include some starter packs for anyone who just wants to give sowing seeds a try.

Thank you to all those who donated or bought seed. Do let us know your results.

Malverleys – a garden visit!

Jill Whitehead

We were all in the same boat with Covid restrictions this year. For me it did not matter too much, not being one for gadding about but I do miss my garden visits. I wouldn't consider they are essential but I really wanted to see Malverleys, a garden I have been trying to visit for a while. Tickets were booked through the NGS back in March and I could hardly wait. Then along came Covid and so much was cancelled. But this visit wasn't cancelled – it went ahead with social distancing in place and no tea or cake! I just wanted to see the garden, it's structure and plant combinations. It promised the excitement you had as a child with a promised annual trip to the seaside. Our visit to Malverleys was in mid-July and I had that feeling of magical anticipation.

Malverleys is situated on the Hampshire/Berkshire border. The Head Gardener is Mat Reese who often writes in *Gardens Illustrated* magazine and that is where I first read about the garden. Also several gardening friends mentioned it, tempting me further. Each time I tried to book a visit last year I was unable to get a ticket, so this year when the tickets were due to go online, I was on my machine ready to click the button and book my ticket!

Mat spent some years working at Great Dixter and I think his planting thoughts are influenced both by that time and his visits to see plants in the wild. He is a self-confessed plantaholic and it shows. The planting is really effusive, full of colour, yet all tied together by the occasional formal element such as clipped trees and shrubs. 'Never be afraid to experiment' were his words and he certainly follows that motto himself. Most of the planting and the layout have been developed in the last ten years, with Mat working with the garden owners on the design, creating most of them from bare grassland but with the much envied mature trees which add their own character to the estate. Previous elements did exist, like the walled kitchen garden, but even in that area Mat has influenced the planting. The White Garden was spectacular and all the better for being contained within the walled area. However, it was the long borders in front of the house that intrigued me. The owners wanted long colourful borders to soften the large stately Victorian house but also to allow some glimpses of the landscape beyond. Perennials, shrubs, bulbs and annuals are mixed up but with key plants being repeated along the border. The York stone path was the anchor, with plants spilling and frothing over, to soften and yet enhance at the same time. There was a rhythm to the border, not only in the plants used but also in the heights and textures of the foliage; smaller contrasting with larger, and the occasional surprise element that stopped you in your tracks, an added bonus! But the *Dierama* were stunners and I was envious. The wide, un-pointed joints in the paving allowed the *Dierama* to self-sow, so much so that they have to be removed like weeds from along the path. If only they grew like that here!

It seems as if knowing how to edit is the skill; which can be allowed to self sow and how many can stay. Enough to give a lively, natural effect but not too many of any individual is allowed to dominate the scene. One can see why they are called 'Angel's Fishing Rods' as the effect was magical, arching over the path so you had to carefully brush through them, adding to that feeling of being Alice in Wonderland! By allowing them to self-sow, there were subtle differences in the colour tones and the silvery seed cases glisten on a sunny day. I have seen a similar effect with *Dierama* at Cothay Manor in Somerset. Again, they were self-seeding in a terrace, but so much so that the terrace was almost unusable!

One of the phrases which stuck in my mind from Mat's introductory talk was that gardens should be atmospheric — we should be engaged as we explore and we should be delighted with the feeling of inclusion. I certainly was at Malverleys and looking at others also visiting, this was a mutual feeling. All I need now is another visit in the spring or autumn, because one visit to a great garden is never enough.



The magic of Malverleys

Pitfalls from the past - and how I fell into them

Alun Whitehead

No matter how careful we are, mistakes will occur. Hindsight is such a wonderful thing, but it is never there when you need it.

Two examples spring to mind this year. The first started with a harmless browse in a charity shop and Jill spotting some old editions of *My Garden* dating back to the 1930s. Michael Vaughn writing in 1935 on Waterside Irises mentions "For smaller spaces 'Perry's Pigmy', only 18 in., with violet flowers, is worth noting". I had always understood that this Siberian had been named because of its smaller flowers. This clearly threw that into doubt. The writer was comparing 'Perry's Pigmy' with the taller 'Emperor', 'Perry's Blue' and 'Caesar' which were all 3-4 ft. Now frankly on our soil, there is not a lot of difference in height between these and it set alarm bells ringing. But before destroying our stock, I thought I'd better check how Perry described his Pigmy: "Neat tufts of narrow, grass-like foliage, small, dark purple-blue flowers." No mention of height there. 'Perry's Pigmy' has a more lax habit with us and the description of *grass-like foliage* certainly rings true. Floppy leaves will probably get frowned upon by the judge, but in a natural setting, especially by the waterside, it may be ideal. Height is something that will vary with culture and so it is not very reliable for identification. Perhaps the writer saw the irises growing in different situations and didn't appreciate how heights can vary? On the whole, after this scare, I still have reasonable faith in the 'Perry's Pigmy' we are growing, but at the end of the day it is only a reasonability test. The time must be soon when new cultivars will have their DNA profile registered - mind you, that will still leave us to argue over the clones masquerading under the old cultivar names.

For some time, I had been toying with the idea of an *Iris sibirica* collection. It could be considered a subset of our current collection, if you like. It would highlight the differences between the different species. It would also highlight how few cultivars there are of pure *Iris sibirica*. I was aware of the historic '*Iris sibirica nana alba*' and decided to grow it for interest. As soon as I saw the flower, I knew there was a mistake. Two flowers on a stem with green spathes at flowering time - it had to be *Iris sanguinea*. No wonder people get confused! The American Iris Wiki (wiki.irises.org) was enlightening. *Iris sanguinea* var. *nana forma alba* is often incorrectly listed as *sibirica nana alba* because some forms lack the infusion of purple on the spathe which is normally a key character for *Iris sanguinea*. The lack of infusion on the spathes caused no confusion with 'Snow Queen' (1900), but perhaps the origin of that collection of *sanguinea* by Barr made the species clear. *See the front of the cover.*

I have often associated the lack of dark pigment in leaves or spathes with white flower forms - take Dictamnus or our native foxglove (*Digitalis purpurea*) where the leaves of the white forms are pale green. To my mind, I

have always thought of this as an 'albino' characteristic, but with plants you have to be careful using the term as it is often used for plants lacking chlorophyll which is a different matter. It might seem a strange concept, a plant having no chlorophyll. If you sow the seed of *Astrantia* 'Sunningdale Variegated' they will germinate easily and the seed leaves will be all white. Unfortunately, having no chlorophyll the seedling cannot produce 'food' and dies - so probably not worth trying. However, some plants can get by with just a little chlorophyll. The Hosta 'White Feather' also springs to mind. The new leaves on pseudatas often start white and it takes some time for the chlorophyll to develop; that white with a green blush will be worrying at first, but can be very attractive. Of course, true parasitic plants do not need chlorophyll or leaves. Have you seen the flowers of the Common Toothwort (*Lathraea squamaria*) just appearing in your woods? Mistletoe too being labelled a parasite is a bit misleading in this respect - look at those green leaves - and yes it does produce its own 'food'.



Perry's Pigmy



Perry's Pigmy

Plant Feeding and Mulching

Brita Carson

This used to be sheep country here in the Southwest of Scotland ever since the days of the Scots, probably some of my ancestors, nipping over the border to steal them from the Cumbrians. Unfortunately sheep don't fill the fields the same nowadays which has either fast maturing, wall to wall trees or stark naked turbines but all is not lost. I have found a company in the Lake District National Park, Dalefoot Composts, who use sheep's wool and bracken to make a compost which feeds the plants and acts as a mulch at the same time. Bracken is not a favourite plant of mine so to my mind the perfect solution for getting rid of it annually in the summer. The compost is a little bit pricey but I'm going to give it a good test run next year to see what the results are. (Amazon charges far too much for it and I got my order straight from the company but had to pay for delivery.)

It is organic and feeds the plants for 12 months which would save extra feeding mid-way through the growing season. It is peat free and because it is good at retaining moisture it requires less watering. It is high in natural potassium, potash, hopefully giving the plants a little something extra to produce 'vibrant flowers' with the wow factor. The only virtue that bracken has is the trace elements it adds to the compost. The company who make the compost use wool from their own and their neighbours white-faced Woodland and Cheviot sheep and the bracken they cut down themselves from the hillsides. This combination is not a new idea but was a recipe they found from a very old book written years ago. Today fleeces from sheep are not fetching much money. The owners experimented with several different formula but decided on this one. Having only received the order recently it has been applied as a mulch to several pots of seedlings so far and I look forward to seeing the results. It is an excellent natural, sustainable resource and I'm delighted to be supporting the sheep farmers.

Note of caution. Nowadays everyone is encouraged to wear protective gloves for handling composts especially organic ones.

Unfortunately they were out of stock of their ericaceous one that I would have found particularly useful as a mulch for my new bed of Japanese irises but as the other composts are all naturally below pH 7, I'm happy to use it. On trial are their seed compost, potting compost, Lakeland Gold and double strength compost. The double strength will last for two years. It breaks up heavy clay soil and greatly improves the soil friability. Results will appear next year.

Another experiment on the go at the moment is trying to find plant labels that are invisible to two lovely big golden retriever visitors who take great delight in pulling them out of the ground, chewing them and then leaving them somewhere else. Any ideas would be gratefully appreciated.

This has not been the year to check the length of time irises remain in flower but the one that would have been the outright winner was 'Shaker's Prayer'. It flowered on and on through all the hot dry weather here. The rest were crying out for rain as was I in the end.

OFFICERS and REPRESENTATIVES

Membership Secretary and Treasurer: Alun Whitehead
Aulden Farm, Aulden, Leominster, Herefordshire HR6 0JT
Tel: 01568 720129 Email: cat@auldenfarm.co.uk

Editor: Mrs Brita Carson
The Old Manse, Johnstonebridge, Lockerbie, Dumfriesshire DG11 1ES
Tel: 01576 470647 Email: britacarson@btinternet.com

Seed Distribution Officer: Janet Miller
Westwind, Main Road, West Keal, Spilsby, Linc., PE23 4BE
Tel: 01790 753557 Email: miller.janet.25@gmail.com

Specialists:

Siberians: Mrs Jennifer Hewitt
4 Cherry Tree Walk, 49 Dobbins Lane, Wendover, Buck. HP22 6DH
Tel: 01296 625660 Email: jennifer.hewitt135@btinternet.com

PCIs: Fr Philip Jones
Carmelite Monastery, Hot Pot Wynd, Dysart, Kirkcaldy KY1 2TF
Email: philiperding@dysartcarmel.plus.com

Japanese :

Gordon and Chris Link
The Gobbett Nursery, Farlow, Cleobury Mortimer, Kidderminster,
Worcestershire, DY14 8TD
Tel. 01746 718647 Email: gordon.link11@gmail.com
We are very pleased to welcome Gordon Link and his wife Chris to give us their expertise on Japanese irises. Gordon and Chris have a nursery and grow many plants, shrubs and trees as well as Japanese and Siberian irises.

Spurias: Alun Whitehead, address as above

Website: www.beardlessiris.org

Proof Readers—Julia Carson, Marina Jackson and Jill Whitehead



Park Patrollers. Stay Safe and Keep Your Distance.

©Marina Jackson