

The Review

The Group for
Beardless Irises

Issue No 21 WINTER 2024



Contents

Editors Notes	2
Alun Whitehead	
Thank you Brita	3
A Brief History of <i>Iris series sibiricae</i> in the West	
Pamela Ferns	4
Alas! - Murder in the Monastery 2	10
Alun Whitehead	
<i>Iris dabashanensis</i>	12
Brian Mathew	
<i>Hesperantha coccinea</i>	13
Penny Ross	
<i>Iris chrysographes</i>	17
Brian Mathew	
Howard Kent (1924-2024)	21
Lorraine Sharpe	
Christopher Saunders (1926-2024)	25
Lucy Skellorn	
Rambles around Tokyo	27
Victoria Neumark Jones	
Our Beardless Year 2024	29
Alun & Jill Whitehead	

The photograph on the front cover is a Louisiana iris growing in the Giardino dell'Iris, Florence, courtesy of Anne Milner

The photograph on the back cover is irises growing at the University of York, courtesy of Andrew Jones.

For inside cover photographs - please see p27.

Photographs are by the authors of the articles, unless otherwise noted, and remain their copyright.

Editors Notes

Alun Whitehead

Welcome to this *Review*. Our way of working has changed over the last few years and will continue to change. Brita Carson our mainstay for many years has had to step down and I, with Jill's help, have put this *Review* together. Hopefully, you won't find it too bad?

You will find articles from Pamela Ferns and photos from Penny Ross, both active Plant Heritage members and National Collection holders. Brian Mathew gives us a new iris, *Iris dabashanensis*, and we reprint a previous article of his on *Iris chrysographes*. For copyright reasons we have included the original painting in much reduced size, but thought it would give a better feel for the original article. We have substituted one by Paul Furse, but is the stem to the right true *chrysographes*? It can hybridise in a garden setting. Victoria Neumark Jones visited the Imperial Palace gardens and other sites around Tokyo. She kindly shares her photos.

Sadly, there is also some partings. Dr. Marion Wood has resigned through 'extreme old age', having been active in irises since the 1980s. We wish her well. I'm sorry to say, Sue Bedwell died at the end of November, though not active in the Group, a staunch supporter of the BIS and the Species Group. There are two obituaries, one for Howard Kent who donated a great deal of seed from his spurias. I met him at the BIS AGM at RHS Rosemoor - a true gentleman. The other is for Christopher Saunders who has written for the *Review*. Unfortunately, I never met him, but remember his pleasure at relating tales of the bumping races on the river Cam, where the object is to ram/touch the boat in front and not get hit yourself from the boat behind. Apparently, it was safer and easier to follow from a bike on the towpath - especially if like Christopher was - you are in your nineties!

We are trying something new which we hope you will like. The final article is by Jill and myself, giving an idea of the beardless irises and other *iridaceae* we have met during the year. A fuller presentation will be downloadable from the website, so you can view it at home or on the bus. If you belong to a garden club, it is the sort of thing that can be played if your intended speaker fails to appear.

As always, if you have a burning desire to write or have a subject covered, then do please get in touch. If you feel you can do a better job as Editor then don't be shy!

Thank You Brita

The GBI owes a great debt to Brita Carson our former Editor. She took over the reigns from Philip Allery changing the A4 black & white *Newsletter* to an A5 colour *Review* in 2004. It started with a colour cover and then moved to full colour in 2012. Her determination showed through from the first; '*I didn't want to lose the GBI newsletter so I volunteered for this job without any thought to the quality of work that had gone before me.*' This was a slight understatement as Brita had been editing *Northern Leaves* the journal of a regional group of the Hardy Plant Society. It actually contained a humorous *Kayley's Column* supposedly written by her border collie (sadly no longer with us). Brita brought that fresh perspective and the drive to get things done and the Group moving forward.

Many people underestimate the work of an Editor. There is not a large pool of people willing to write and the greater part of their time is spent following up possibilities, keeping an ear open and persuading people to contribute. Brita has managed that for 2/5ths of our Group's existence and had contributed herself 68 articles (including Editorials) by 2020. And so a very big **THANK YOU** is due and sincerely given.

Brita suffered a health problem whilst completing the 2023 *Review*. However, she is recovering well and so hopefully she will contribute an article again so that we can hear about her latest seedling successes. So in Kayley's final words for *Northern Leaves*, it's not farewell, but '*Au Revoir*'.



A Brief History of *Iris series sibiricae* in the West

Pamela Ferns

It is not known when or who first brought the plant we now know as *Iris sibirica* to Britain but we do know that during the medieval era, this species was collected from the wild and grown in royal gardens and monasteries. The first written record, in the west, is thought to have been by the French botanist Charles de L'Écluse (known as Carolus Clusius) in his *History of Pannonian Plants* (1583) where he calls it *Iris angustifolia*. Fourteen years later, using the name *Iris sylvestris bizantia*, John Gerard wrote



I. sanguinea plate from Curtis's
Botanical Magazine (1814)



I. sibirica plate from *The
Botanical Magazine* (1788)

in *The Herbal* that 'these plants do grow in the gardens of London, amongst Herbalists and lovers of plants'.

It was more than 200 years later that another member of the series would be recorded as growing in Britain. *Iris sanguinea* (originally *I. orientalis*) first arrived circa 1790 from Siberia via George Hibbert, an English merchant and amateur botanist who sponsored plant collecting expeditions. It was first published with the name *Iris*

orientalis in 1794 by Swedish Naturalist Carl Peter Thunberg who had previously described it (mistakenly calling it *Iris sibirica*) in his *Flora Japonica* (1784). The name *I. orientalis* had already been given to another iris so was not valid for this species. It was renamed by English botanist James Donn as *Iris sanguinea*.

In 1848, English botanist and Explorer, Sir Joseph Dalton Hooker, sketched an iris in the wild on Mount Tonglo (now Tonglu), Sikkim. It wasn't until 1892 that the iris was named *Iris clarkei* by the keeper of the herbarium at the Royal Botanic Gardens Kew, John Gilbert Baker. He named the iris for British botanist Charles Baron Clarke who collected specimens in 1875 in the Himalayas. It was brought into cultivation in Europe by Sir George King, superintendent of the Royal Botanic Garden, Calcutta, whose team collected the iris in the Chumbi Valley, Tibet.



I. clarkei pictured in W. R. Dykes' book *The Genus Iris* (1913)



I. delavayi illustrated in *Revue Horticole* (1895)

In 1884, while on an expedition for the Paris Museum of Natural History, Pierre Jean Marie Delavay collected the iris now named in his honour, *Iris delavayi*, in Sichuan. It was introduced into cultivation by the Paris *Jardin des Plantes* in 1889 from seeds sent by Delavay. In 1907, an article in *The Gardeners' Chronicle* (1907) stated that *I. delavayi* had 'not received that measure of popularity that its worth entitles it to' as it 'possesses grace and

refinement; its flowers are unique amongst the grassy Irises in flower and form'.

While on his second trip to China (1903-1905) sponsored by Veitch's Nursery, English botanist Ernest Henry Wilson recorded in his field notes that he collected a yellow iris at 9000ft. This iris was subsequently named after him by Charles Henry Wright in 1907. When describing *Iris wilsonii* in 1924, William Rickatson Dykes, an amateur botanist who specialised in the growing and breeding of irises, unfairly wrote that, the flowers are 'scarcely large enough nor of a clear enough colour to make the plant effective'. He then added that he thought it would, however, be useful in hybridisation to give a yellow ground instead of white 'to the flowers of hybrids with such species as *sibirica*, *delavayi* and others'.



I. wilsonii pictured in W. R. Dykes' book *The Genus Iris* (1913)



I. forrestii in *The Gardener's Chronicle*, 1910

In 1906, while on his first sponsored plant collecting trip, George Forrest employed local Naxi people to aid in his work, led by Zhao Chengzhang. When exploring the Lichiang Range (Yulong Shan) in north-west Yunnan, Forrest and his team collected seeds and pressed specimens of another yellow iris related to *Iris sibirica*. On the 25th June 1910, Dykes wrote in *The Gardeners' Chronicle* that 'by a lucky chance another Chinese Iris, collected by Mr. Forrest, and sent to me by Mr. A. K. Bulley, also came into flower on the same day, and this plant I propose to name *I. forrestii*'. Arthur Bulley (who sponsored the trip) was eager for introductions to be named in relation to himself, his plant nursery (now Ness Botanic Gardens), or George Forrest, thus the

name *I. forrestii* would have boosted the sales of a plant he described to Forrest as being 'not showy enough to sell well'. Understandably, Forrest was not impressed with this statement and, combined with what he felt was extremely low pay, wrote that Bulley was a 'cad of the first order'.

In 1910 William Rickatson Dykes named *Iris bulleyana*, after A. K. Bulley, from whom he received the plant. According to Bulley, these plants were grown from seed collected by George Forrest on his plant collecting expedition to China (1904-1907) on which he had also collected *Iris forrestii*. However,



I. chrysographes pictured in W. R. Dykes' book *The Genus Iris* (1913)



I. bulleyana pictured in W. R. Dykes' book *The Genus Iris* (1913)

upon viewing a photograph of the iris, George Forrest stated that he did not recall collecting or seeing the plant in the wild! This led Dykes to believe that it was not in fact a separate species of iris but a hybrid. As stated previously, Forrest employed a team of locals to assist him in collecting, packaging and pressing specimens, with the team continuing this process even in Forrest's absence. This could be the reason Forrest had no recollection of seeing the iris in the wild - he himself did not collect it. However, the true species was identified in 1994 during an expedition by the Alpine Garden Society and RBG Kew. It was reported

that it was found in large colonies in north-west Yunnan.

In 1907, Ernest Henry Wilson began his third trip to China, exploring western Hubei and western Szechuan which was on behalf of the Arnold Arboretum in America. Not only was he to collect seeds and herbarium specimens of woody plants, but he was to also to collect plant material and seeds for his many private subscribers. One of these subscribers was the well-known horticulturalist Miss Ellen Willmott. Within the material Willmott received from Wilson were iris seeds.

After growing these on she sent some seedlings to W. R. Dykes. The seedlings flowered in 1911, and the species was subsequently named *Iris chrysographes* by Dykes who looked more favourably on this iris than he did upon *I. wilsonii*. He described *I. chrysographes* as being 'perhaps the most striking of all of those recently introduced from western China'.

Occasionally *Iris dykesii* is included in publications under the Siberian Iris heading so I thought I would include it. The plant was grown from seed by Dykes who believed its origins to be western China. The plant flowered in 1926, after his death, with its wild origins remaining unknown. It is however, listed as being a synonym of *Iris chrysographes* on the WFO Plant List.



Iris typhifolia in Bob Wise's greenhouse

The most recent addition to series *Sibiricae* is *Iris typhifolia*. It was first discovered and named by Japanese botanist Maso Kitagawa in north-east China in 1928. It was not known in the west until 1982 when Professor Zhao Yu-Tang included it in his article in the British Iris Society's *Yearbook*. Zhao distributed seeds to various growers in Europe including the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew. He also sent seedlings to various members of the British Iris Society. In November 1989, *Iris typhifolia* flowered for the first time in the west in the cold greenhouse of BIS member Bob Wise.

References

Dykes, W.R. (1913) *The Genus Iris*. The University Press, Cambridge.
Harvey, Y., Paterson, L. (2021) *Collecting with Zhao Chengzhang* https://propagatelearning.rbge.ac.uk/pluginfile.php/51178/mod_resource/content/3/3%20Decolonising%20collections%20%28002%29.pdf

Hewitt, J. (1995, 2023) *Iris typhifolia*. *The Review*. Issue 20, Winter 2023, pp.10

Hooker, J. D. (1899) *Iris delavayi*. *Curtis's Botanical Magazine*. Vol 125, Tab 7661

McLean, B. (2004) *George Forrest Plant Hunter*. Antique Collectors' Club Ltd., Suffolk

Mallett, G. B. (1907) *The Alpine Garden*. *The Gardeners' Chronicle*. Vol. 42, pp. 28

Prain, D. (1910) *Iris clarkei*. *Curtis's Botanical Magazine*. Vol 136, Tab. 8323

Sims, J. (1814) *Iris sibirica* v. *sanguinea*, Mr. Hibbert's *Iris*. *Curtis's Botanical Magazine*. Vol. 39, Tab.1604

Stebbins, G. (1997) *The Gardeners' Guide to Growing Irises*. David & Charles, Exeter

Picture credits:

Iris sibirica from Curtis, W., (1788) *The Botanical Magazine*, London, vol. 2, plate 50
<https://bibdigital.rjb.csic.es/viewer/15971/?offset=#page=62&viewer=picture&o=bookmark&n=0&q=>

Iris sibirica v. *sanguinea*, Mr. Hibbert's *Iris* from Sims, J., (1814) *Curtis's Botanical Magazine*. Vol. 39, Tab.1604
 Source- <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/item/14323#page/1/mode/1up>

Iris clarkei from Dykes, W.R. (1913) *The Genus Iris*. The University Press, Cambridge. Plate V Source- <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/item/201906#page/12/mode/1up>

Iris delavayi from Andre, E. D., Carrière, E. A., (1895) *Revue Horticole* (1895) Librairie agricole de la maison rustique, Paris. Fig. 129-129, pp.399

Iris wilsonii from Dykes, W.R. (1913) *The Genus Iris*. The University Press, Cambridge. Plate II Source- <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/item/201906#page/12/mode/1up>

Iris forrestii from Dykes, W. R. (1910) Three New Chinese Irises. *The Gardener's Chronicle*. Vol. 47, 3rd series, pp. 418 Source- <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/item/83834#page/474/mode/1up>

Iris bulleyana from Dykes, W.R. (1913) *The Genus Iris*. The University Press, Cambridge. Plate VI Source- <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/item/201906#page/12/mode/1up>

Iris chrysographes from Dykes, W.R. (1913) *The Genus Iris*. The University Press, Cambridge. Plate IV Source- <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/item/201906#page/12/mode/1up>

Iris typhifolia from Wise, B. (1992) published in Waddick, J., Zhao, Y. (1992) *Iris of China*. Timber Press Inc., Oregon, Fig. 12

Ed. Don't forget, the original paintings by Frank Round for The Genus Iris can be seen in the BIS Library.

Alas! - Murder in the Monastery 2

A conversation with Father Philip Jones
Alun Whitehead

Photos by
Sister Eileen

Firstly Brita Carson had kindly forwarded some photos of Fr. Philip's pacific coast irises, and these are given below.

Then in late September I received a call from Father Philip with the worst possible news. In retirement he has moved to a monastery in Liverpool where there was no space for his beloved irises. He had left 40 growing by the side of a vegetable patch at the Carmelite Monastery. Unfortunately, the current zealous gardener had not



only cleared the vegetable patch, but the whole area. His irises are now lost and we only have images of what has been.



A general discussion about PCIs followed and Fr. Philip would like someone to be their champion in the UK. You will find his advice in previous articles, but one thing that he stressed was the best time to transplant is just after flowering when the roots are growing. He also surprised me by saying that his plants retained the seed in the pods, so that he could collect it later. In contrast at Aulden, when the capsules split the seed is scattered and so we have to make a mental note to look about 6 weeks after lowering if we want to collect any.

*Ed. - see Review 2009 for
Murder in the Monastery 1*



Iris dabashanensis

Brian Mathew

This newcomer in the series *Chinenses* was named in 2020 by Carol Wilson although it had been in cultivation in the UK for some years before but was identified as *I. henryi*. It is a native of Sichuan Province in China where it inhabits wooded areas on limestone formations. Plants have grown well in slight shade in a well-drained leaf mould-rich soil and it seems to be hardy in Surrey with the evergreen leaves remaining undamaged after frosts to -8 deg. C. Although making dense leafy clumps with a mass of fibrous roots, which makes division difficult, it also produces stolons that can be detached in summer and treated as cuttings in a propagator. Seeds are also formed following hand pollination; there is more than one clone now in cultivation so best results are obtained following cross-pollination.



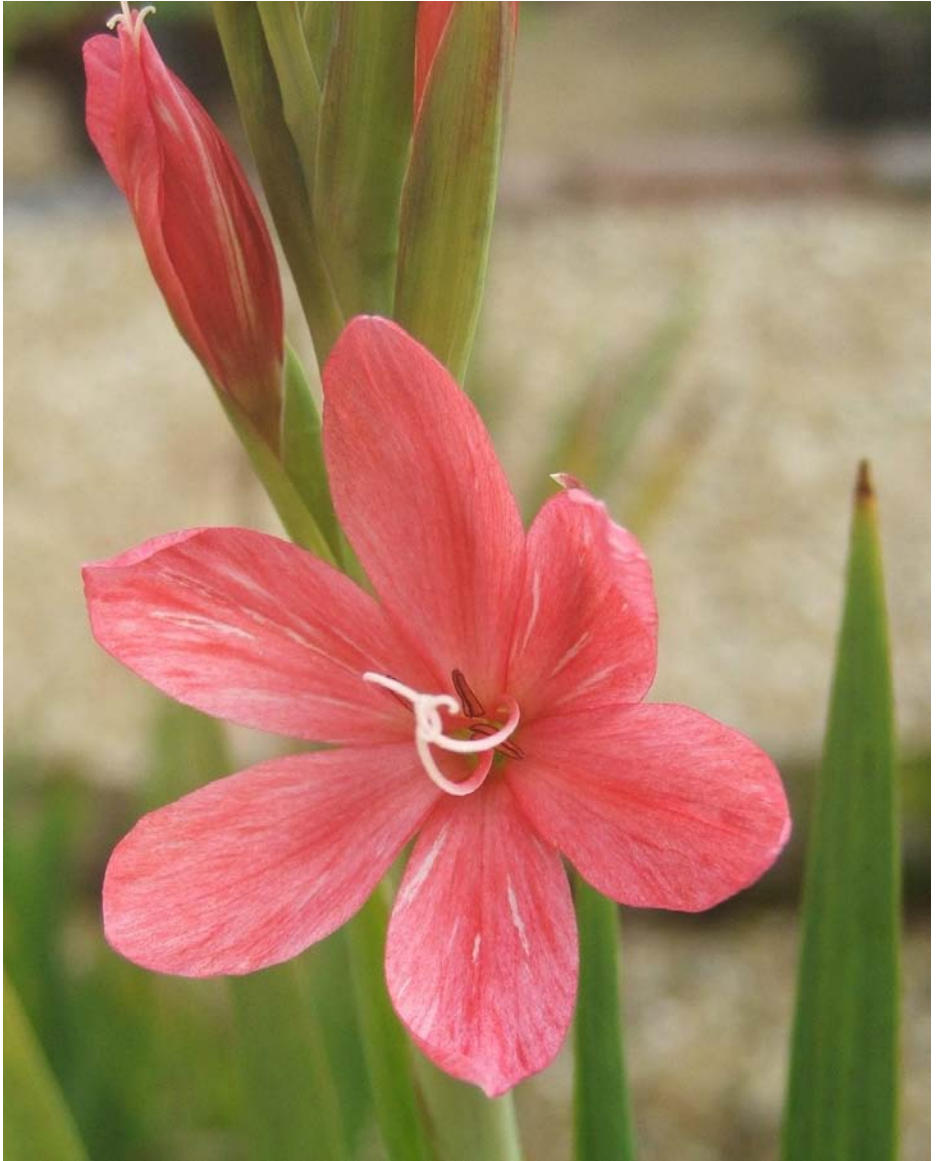
Hesperantha coccinea

We are grateful to Penny Ross for sharing some of her wonderful photographs of *Hesperantha coccinea* with us. She, with her husband David, hold the National Collection of *Hesperantha coccinea* cultivars in Gloucestershire. For further information, please see

<https://www.plantheritage.org.uk/national-plant-collections/search-the-national-plant-collections/collection/1609/hesperantha-coccinea-cvs-schizostylis>



'Cindy Towe'



'Fenland Daybreak'



'Snow Maiden'



Iris chrysographes

Brian Mathew

Reprint from *The Plantsman* March 1993 by kind permission of James Armitage – Editor of *The Plant Review* (formerly *The Plantsman*)

THE CHINESE *IRIS CHRYSOGRAPHES* was named and described by W.R. Dykes in *The Gardeners' Chronicle* of 1911 from plants which had been given to him by Miss Ellen Willmott of Warley Place in Essex. She had acquired some seeds collected by Ernest Wilson in 1908 in western Sichuan and had successfully germinated them, subsequently passing on some of the resulting seedlings to Dykes who flowered them in 1911. He noted the 'rich velvety red purple' flowers which had a variable amount of gold veining on the falls, hence his choice of the epithet *chrysographes*, 'with golden markings'. The species was illustrated a year later, although very crudely, in the *Botanical Magazine*, tab. 8433, but, poor as it is, the painting does give an idea of the rich solidity of the flower colouring of this species. Reddish purple is a very apt description of the colour, and the various selections which have been made during the 80 years since its introduction all fall within this overall statement, although the darkest ones appear nearly black, coupled with a velvet-like texture.

Iris chrysographes belongs to a group of species forming the series *Sibiricae*, along with *I. sibirica*, *I. sanguinea*, *I. delavayi*, *I. forrestii* etc. , and of the seven or so species which form this group Dykes was most impressed by this particular one and regarded it as 'one of the best of many beautiful Chinese plants we owe to Mr E.H. Wilson. In its best forms it is really magnificent, and I shall never forget the experience of watching the first flower unfold, and of seeing for the first time the brilliant golden markings on the rich velvety deep purple-violet falls'. However, in general, he was not impressed, it seems, by the collectors who visited this part of the world, for he noted that 'it is unfortunate that the various explorers, who since the beginning of the century have visited the great storehouse of good plants in western China, seem all to have been more interested in rhododendrons and other flowering shrubs than in anything so lowly as an iris. Consequently we do not know as much as we might about this group of irises'. Dykes would be disappointed to find that this is still largely true and there is not a great deal known about *I. chrysographes* and its Chinese relatives with regard to their range of variation in the wild, their exact distribution and the extent to which the species meet and hybridise. What we do know is that they are all superb garden plants and *I. chrysographes* in particular is exciting with its very dark rich colours.

The cultivars of *I. chrysographes*

Iris chrysographes received an RHS Award of Merit on 3 June, 1914 when shown by W.R. Dykes and Miss Ellen Willmott. The particular plant exhibited was described as 'deep violet-purple in colour, with a central line of gold on the long hanging falls, and a few dots of the same at the throat'. Since that time garden selections have been made and quite a number of these have



Iris chrysographes forms painted by Paul Furse (above) and a reduced image of the original 'Black Knight' (right) painting by Rodella Purves which was the frontispiece in the original article. (see Editorial)



been named, some at the reddish purple end of the scale and others nearing black. From the garden value point of view it is certainly worth growing at least two different ones but there is not a lot to choose between several of the very dark forms and it is almost a question of availability rather than preference. In the reddish purple shades, 'Rubella' (or var. *rubella*) is an old, well-known cultivar which received an Award of Merit in 1937 when exhibited by Major F.C. (later Sir Frederick) Stern. This was shown as Kingdon Ward 4025 and later named var. *rubella*, so was presumably introduced from the wild as seeds, and the award plant was one of the seedlings. This would partly account for the variation which exists within this variety, and further variation will have occurred more recently in gardens. The description of the plant which received the A.M. was 'flowers deep plum purple, with no gold blotch on the falls' - but one can certainly find plants under the same name with small gold markings in the centre of the falls. 'Rubella' is a short sturdy variety, usually no more than about 35 cm in height. Other reddish purples are or have been cultivated under the names 'Crimson Form', 'Red Form', 'Mandarin Purple' (listed by Jack Drake in 1950), 'Kermes', which was distributed by Sir Arthur Hort and exhibited in the 1950s by R. Wallace & Co., and 'Stjernesud', a deeper violet shade with a yellow stripe on the falls. The name 'Goldmark' denotes a selection which also has a prominent stripe in the centre of each of the falls. The darker, blackish purple cultivars have always aroused much attention so it is not surprising that there are quite a number of named ones, although there is not a lot of difference in appearance. Professor William G. McGarvey self-pollinated *I. chrysographes* and raised one in the 1960s which he called 'Id', describing it as 'black from the red side' with 'so small a thread of gold on its falls as to be almost hidden'. The subject of the frontispiece, 'Black Knight' is aptly described by Beth Chatto as velvety indigo-blue, almost black, while 'Black Velvet' is possibly an even blacker velvet. 'Kew Black' is very similar, and this received an A.M. on 4 June, 1952 when exhibited by the Royal Botanic Gardens. 'Black Beauty' is yet another, scarcely different, and 'Black Form' is also self explanatory. Sometimes these dark variants are referred to as var. *nigra*, while some nurseries prefer not to list named clones but instead offer a pot luck range of 'hybrids' or 'seedlings', and indeed some of these probably are hybrids with other species of the *Sibiricae*. Although not within the scope of this article, it is necessary to mention that not only does *I. chrysographes* hybridise with species within its group giving a range of intermediates, it will also cross with the Pacific Coast irises of the *Californicae* series producing the Cal-Sibe hybrids, of which the famous reddish violet 'Margot Holmes' was one of the earliest, a *chrysographes-douglasiana* hybrid which received the first ever Dykes Award from the British Iris Society in 1927. There is now quite a range of Cal-Sibes, using *I. douglasiana* and other Pacific Coast species such as *I. tenax* (the 'Inshriach Form' of *I. chrysographes* is probably the result of such a cross), and *I. innominata*.

Cultivation

In the wild, in Sichuan and Yunnan, *I. chrysographes* inhabits marshy places, ditches and stream margins, often accompanying ericaceous plants. Not surprisingly, therefore, for the successful cultivation of this Chinese species and its variants it is necessary to have an acid soil which is well-supplied with moisture in the summer growing season since it does not stand up well to long hot dry periods. A position near a pond is ideal, where plenty of peat and old rotted compost has been worked in deeply before planting. The rhizomes can be planted in autumn or spring and should be covered by 3 to 5 cm of soil.

Propagation may be by division of clumps but seedlings will not necessarily be exactly the same as the parent plant, even if there are no *chrysographes* forms or other Sibiricae species in the vicinity. Seeds ripen in the late summer and may be sown at any time through the autumn or winter, germination normally taking place in the spring with a period of two to three years before flowers can be expected. Various methods of sowing and subsequent treatment may be adopted but a simple and successful technique is to sow in pots, covering the seeds with a good layer of grit to keep them uniformly moist and weed free, then plunging the pots in an outside bed until germination. Once the seedlings have pushed through the grit the pots can be placed in a cold frame to encourage strong growth and when large enough to handle easily the young plants are potted individually for growing on for a few months until well rooted, then placed out in a suitable site where they will stay until flowering size.

Dividing up established clumps provides fewer plants, but the resulting divisions are identical with the parents and are likely to flower much sooner, probably the following year. Division is best carried out in early autumn since there is good root activity at this time, and the divisions will become established before the winter. With sizeable clumps it is best to shake off most of the excess soil, or even wash it off with a hose, so that the roots and rhizomes can be seen clearly, thus making the process of division easier. Single pieces of rhizome, each with roots and a shoot, can be separated off successfully, so a large clump is capable of giving rise to a useful number of offspring. The divisions must be planted before they have dried out too much, and then kept moist through the autumn until well established.

Literature

DILLISTONE, G. 1930. *Dykes on Irises*. British Iris Society.

DYKES, W.R. 1911. New and noteworthy plants: *Iris chrysographes*. *Gardeners Chronicle*, Series 3, Vol. 49, p.362.

GREY-WILSON, C. 1971. *The Genus Iris*, subsection Sibiricae. British Iris Society.

KOHLIN, F. 1987. *Iris*. Christopher Helm.

CASSIDY, G.E. & LINNEGAR, S. 1989. *Growing Iris*. Croom Helm.

THOMAS, G.S. 1982. *Perennial Garden Plants*. J.M. Dent, London.

WADDICK, J.W. & ZHAO YU-TANG. 1992. *Iris of China*. Timber Press, Portland, Oregon.

Howard Kent

24th November 1934 – 14th February 2024

Howard Kent was a market gardener in north Cornwall who developed a passion for irises in his youth and joined the BIS in 1950. This was a hobby that was to be re-kindled in his retirement and by 2010 he was contributing seed. Sadly Howard passed away at his market garden home 'Cropstone' in February 2024 aged 89 years

The following write up is combination of text from the BIS and his daughter Lorraine.



Howard's parents purchased 'Cropstone' when Howard was just 3 years old. They would go on to add fields and develop it into a small holding, growing flowers and vegetables which they sold locally and keeping cattle on the spare land. So Howard grew up with gardening 'in his blood' and joined his parents on the small holding when he left school and was able to pursue his interest in both bearded and beardless irises.

'Cropstone', in St Minver near Wadebridge is situated on the north Cornish coast about one mile inland and subject to the prevailing north and north-westerly winds. The shallow, alkaline soil, overlying slate, holds very little moisture, and with salt-laden air imposes restrictions on what can be grown, despite the advantage of mild winter temperatures and freedom from severe frosts. However Howard managed to successfully grow a variety of irises.

After his initial interest other responsibilities then came along; marriage, children and thirty years membership of the Royal Observer



Corps, ROC. Howard married Frances in 1966, Lorraine was born in 1969 and Kate in 1971. Howard continued with the market garden working alongside his mother until her passing in 1990. Around this time he combined it with other jobs and then semi-retirement, fully retiring by 2000.

The property at 'Cropstone' was renovated in the early 1990s and it was around this time Howard's interest in irises were re-kindled. I remember the commercial greenhouses, once used for tomatoes in the Summer and then chrysanthemums in the Winter, being used for growing iris from seed. Beds were developed as the collection expanded, some on the footprint of former green houses, others specifically created around a garden pond he built.



By 2010 Howard started donating seed to the GBI scheme and the British Iris Society. Since then he was a supporter of the scheme up until the time of his death and the BIS/GBI were grateful for the seed.

Howard was a very kind and gentle man, quietly knowledgeable about the things he took an interest in like the ROC, gardening and antiques. Semi-retirement and retirement also saw him collect cacti once more and he was a member of the British Cacti and Succulent Society. Howard was a very stoical man; despite health issues with a heart condition and deteriorating mobility he did not complain and never ceased to amaze people with what he could still do in the garden!

I remember his irises looking particularly good in 2021 and a lot of the



photographs are from this time, although there are many from earlier times in the drawers at Cropstone! The photograph of Howard is also from 2021 with his wife Frances and son-in-law Leigh and the last of the commercial green houses he used for growing seed.



He loved his iris and had so many. Lorraine plans to look after them as she inherits Cropstone. Unfortunately he is not survived by his wife of 57 years, Frances, as she passed away a few months earlier than Howard in October 2023. He is survived by daughter Lorraine, son-in-law Leigh and grandchildren Rauf and Lizzie; granddaughter Zoe, (Kate's daughter), grandson-in-law Jake and great grandson Isaac.

This year his bearded irises did not do so well, it was so wet and the snails so many, but the beardless irises flowered well and there are a couple of photos below.



Christopher Saunders 1926-2024

Lucy Skellorn

I hold the National Collection of Irises bred by Sir Michael Foster (1836 - 1907). 8 years ago, when I first started my journey to find as many of Foster's Iris cultivars as I could, Christopher's name came up as someone I must make contact with.



Christopher Saunders (2020) and *Iris* 'Shelford Giant' (spuria)

I was told he was a long-standing member of the British Iris Society and had lived in Sir Michael's House - Nine Wells, in a village called Shelford in the Gog Magog Hills, South of Cambridge (pictured). An introduction was made and Christopher kindly invited me to his home to discuss Sir Michael.

At this point, Christopher and his wife had moved from Nine Wells House, downsizing to a central Cambridge location enabling them to walk to shops and be closer to friends. They had lived at Nine



Nine Wells House - *Gardeners Chronicle*, February 2nd 1907.

Wells for 42 years.

Christopher was enthusiastic about my search for Sir Michael's Irises and generous in sharing much of his research. With a keen interest in Sir Michael's contributions to science, Christopher had accumulated essays, photos and references that he shared with me. This included Sir Michael's obituary from the *Gardeners Chronicle*, ordnance survey maps of the 10 acres including Sir Michael's 'research garden' and black and white photos of Nine Wells taken by the family that lived there during the Second World War. He had also sourced a few of his Irises over the years including *Iris* 'Monspur' (spuria) from Anne Blanco White who had visited the garden in 2003 and the aptly named 'Shelford Giant' (pictured), which grows to 6 feet tall. This had been sourced from Alun Whitehead.

Christopher's generosity immediately struck me. He had never met me before but welcomed me into his home, shared historical documents and we made a plan to dig and divide irises later in the year. Since that initial meeting, I have met with Christopher several times and he has kindly introduced me to the current owners of Nine Wells House, which I have been lucky enough to visit.

Over the years Christopher has contributed several articles to the British Iris Society including one in 2016 which is a fantastic record of Sir Michael's achievements.

I will remember Christopher as someone who had incredible energy and enthusiasm. When I last saw him (aged 96), I asked how he kept so fit, to which he answered - rowing, as 'it uses all the muscles'. He managed to maintain this passion to the end and was still rowing on the nearby river Cam at 97!

Note: Don't forget to email Jill for an invite to Lucy's zoom talk: My Family and other irises Thursday, 23rd January 2025 7.30pm
info@britishirissociety.org.uk

Diary Dates 2025

23 Jan 7.30pm Zoom Talk 'My Family and Other Irises'

by Lucy Skellorn

8 Feb 10-3.30pm BIS Early Spring Show, RHS Wisley

27 Apr 10-5pm BIS Late Spring Show & Investigating Iris Day
Plumley Village Hall near Knutsford

31 May - 1 Jun 10-5pm BIS Summer Show, RHS Wisley

14 Oct Deadline for Virtual Show entries - GBI members can enter

Rambles around Tokyo

Victoria Neumark Jones

In late May, I went to Japan on a Ramblers walking holiday. I was dismayed to be missing irises, not least those in my own garden, but there were some compensations!

When we walked, whether along the Nakasendo Way, or by the Oshino ponds near Mt Fuji or planted in a Zen garden pond, or most spectacularly, in the Imperial Palace gardens in Tokyo, we found irises, wild or cultivated. Here are some of the pictures which I, very amateurishly, took.

The yellow ones were everywhere, but the delicate blue ones were quite frequent too, often in solid banks.

I will leave it to the editor to identify any or all, but I would just like to say – preaching to the converted, here! – that every time I saw irises, my heart lifted up in joy at their beauty. Some also smelled nice.

I'm looking forward to next year



Victoria's photos are on the inside cover and I'm afraid identification of these I. ensata cultivars is very difficult - so just enjoy - Ed



Our Beardless Year 2024

Alun & Jill Whitehead

Our year started on the 3rd of January. It probably started before that, but that was the first occasion when we used a camera. 'North Star' was in flower and welcoming us into the year which was encouraging as we were waterlogged in the garden. The only job we could do without damaging the



soil was dismantling an old shade tunnel. Thankfully the other reticulate irises were not showing, but hopefully waiting for the BIS Show in February!

We journeyed to Devon for snowdrops and caught the crocus emerging at Elworthy Cottage and Higher Cherubeer which were more forward than us. On our return, we found our crocuses just thinking about emerging. However, 'Fabiola' was in full flower (unlikely to last until the Show the

following week) and *lazica* 'Richard Nutt' was out in the garden. It is always a bit worrying ahead of any show as to what will be out, but usually the plants play their part. The exception was 2010/11 when we went to a long period of -18°C and about no gardening for 3 months. This year the snow was not going to be a problem, just the wet.

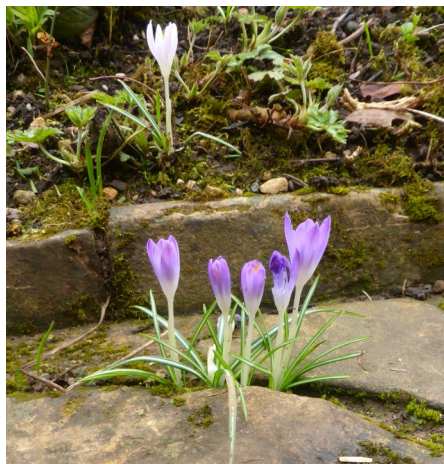
The Early Spring Show was on 10th February at RHS Wisley. We managed to get together a few exhibits and were very pleased to see the other irises being brought in. A beautiful display by Tony Hall with the junos from Kew. And a new exhibitor bringing some mouth-watering crocus. As you would expect, there were reticulate irises which are usually dependable for this show. The reticulate & crocus in the Wisley grounds were very effective. Wisley has been doing large plantings of bulbs in grass and they seem to just get better each



year. Alex Hankey also gave a behind the scene tour of the alpine houses which gives a chance to see how they grow some of the pot plants - such a large range.

As you can imagine, we returned home to a large number of reticulate iris in flower, almost as if they knew that they were too late for the show. We had picked up a couple of trays for display - just in case blooms were lacking - and were still enjoying them a few weeks later.

We ventured over to Hidcote NT on 18th February and were pleased to see some naturalised crocus. One looked similar to 'Harry Hay', quite enchanting with its purple-tipped petals. The gardeners' weed, *C. tommasinianus*, was in the garden by the house happily self-sowing, even into the cracks on the path where you could never plant it. What a spectacle it can make!



The 16th March saw us at the W&MIG AGM at John Massey's, Ashwoods. Not a good time for irises or Iridaceae, but still a fantastic arrange of other plants, Hellebores galore and hepaticas bedazzling in hanging moss bundles.

We were due to open for the NGS at the beginning of April, but the weather had a different thought. **It rained.** With the local flooding and our waterlogged ground, we had no choice but to cancel. We were again keeping off the garden to avoid damaging the soil and we were glad to head to Cornwall the following week to give things a chance to dry. *En route* we did stop off at Castle Drogo NT, a garden designed by irisarian George Dillistone. There are a few irises in the garden, we had been curious to see the Pacific Coast Irises in flower, but we saw the buds - too early for the flowers. At Fowey a *Libertia* was flowering, but nothing else to show.

The BIS Late Spring Show was at RHS Bridgewater. Late April is a difficult time for a show in terms of beardless irises. We managed a few PCIs, a *japonica*. Of course, the smaller bearded irises make a show then and many were on display. What caught the eye was the depth of colour of one of the

Dutch hybrids. Such a glorious purple, you could happily lose yourself in it.

At the beginning of May, the PCIs in the garden started to perform more. One or two are named, but many are just seedlings. 'Banbury Beauty' is reliable in a shadier area. You can enjoy them in the garden, but they also are a good picked flower. Place them in a vase on the windowsill where you can get



a close look at them. At this stage the first of the Siberian irises are flowering, 'Kingfisher' and 'Mrs. Rowe'. Why do many of the older cultivars flower early? The Dutch iris in the garden are looking really good when caught by shafts of sunlight and *I. tectorum* is showing in pots, as is an attractive *Tritonia* sp. of a gentle apricot.

We did not have long at home though as we were off for five

days in Florence for the International Iris Competition. The day before we

arrived there had been heavy thunderstorms in Florence, but the flowers still looked good. We like all irises, but this is a bearded competition. If you want the beardless, you need to go to the lower part of the garden where a few *louisiana* and *pseudacorus* type irises are flowering. Everyone took photos of a stunning



louisiana. The hotter climate must suit it. We enjoyed the welcome, the friendship, the iris cake, but also the people sitting amongst the irises drawing and painting.

It was a shock coming back to our garden. We had two weeks to get on top of it before our May NGS opening. However, we had a chance to enjoy the Siberians at Treberfydd Walled Garden and the PCIs in our own garden. One plant we were given by Judy Rhymes is a show stopper, covered in flowers. Some of our own seedlings were opening, but you should never judge an iris from its first year's flower, so we will see what they will look like in 2025. More Siberians are opening and each day there is something more to see. But before we open it is off to RHS Chelsea for one of us and the other uses it as an excuse to see RBG Kew.



When we ran the nursery a trip in May was almost impossible. We were working very long days. At a Battersea plant fair a conversation ran something like this. We were talking to a fellow stall holder and comparing all the things we were doing that month. We said that finding the time for meals was difficult. The stallholder replied in shock, "you eat in May!" Well we did better than that, we were gadding.

Chelsea per Jill - After being part of team exhibiting there in 2022, it was just bliss to wonder around on Press Day. No crowds, well not too many and





Chelsea

sunshine as well! Spotting irises was not tricky, they seemed to be on many stands and even a good number of beardless, mostly Siberians. Often they were used to enhance a stand, almost as a decoration, to soften and yet to add another element. But they also featured in a few of the Show Gardens. *Iris* 'White Swirl' on the National Garden Scheme Garden blended in perfectly with the white foxgloves and umbellifers. A completely different sort of garden was The Newt Roman Garden, but blue Siberians really shone against statues depicting Roman Gods. Although, there was no dedicated iris nursery stand in the floral marquee, Burncoose Nurseries used *Libertia formosana* to a really good effect. *Iris chrysographes* 'Black Form' featured on a few of

the stands, it always seems to capture folks interest. But for me the best



Kew Gardens



I. milesii



Siberian at Kew



'Shrawley'

exhibit or at least the most creative use was on one of Florist Stands – I will leave will leave you to agree or disagree! (picture previous page)

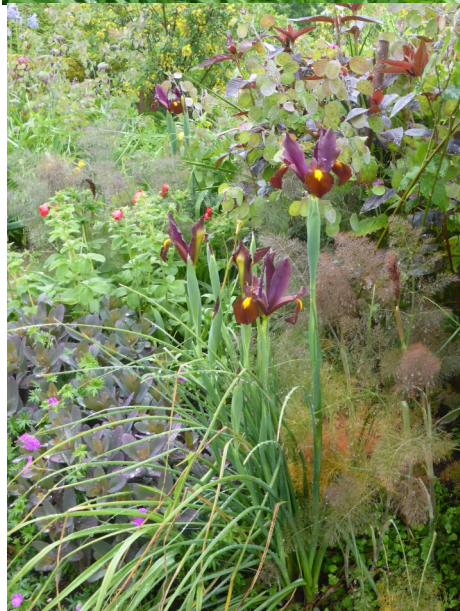
Kew Per Alun - What a beautiful day at Kew, probably too sunny for good photographs but warming and the ice cream tasted all the better. It was good to see the species in flower, the monocot beds with their inviting display. One plant that I was interested in was *I. milesii*, the Red Iris. A form I grew from commercial seed was more of a purple *tectorum*. The jury is still out, but my doubts were reinforced. Another interest was a Siberian which reminded me of 'Shrawley' and I wondered if they had a similar origin.



By 21st May an embarrassment of riches, wherever you looked there were irises. The PCIs were still hanging on, the Siberians were in full flower. The *pseudacorus* by/in the pond were not going to be out done. But it was a 'twee' accident of *Iris x robusta* and an arching *Thalictrum aquilegifolium* which had produced a very eye-catching arrangement.



The Old Rectory,
Thruxton



Scenes from Packwood NT



The garden was almost ready for our opening, but before that two more gardens to visit and a BIS Summer show.

Packwood NT was the first garden. The planting combinations in the garden are always interesting. Placing a tall light blue Siberian by the *Piptanthus* (yellow) was pleasantly subtle. The Dutch iris ('Red Ember'?) by the bronze fennel produced a beautiful cameo. The use of a narrow border in front of a lawn allowed the silhouettes of the irises and the alliums were very enjoyable against the grass backdrop.

The other garden was The Old Rectory at Thruxton to the west of Hereford. Judy and Andy Hallett have opened for charity for quite a few years after moving in 2007. Judy has recently developed a passion for Cedric Morris irises (bearded), but they had a redundant tennis court which they decided would be better are a vegetable parterre. Anyway, it now has *Malus* trees with an underplanting of 'Papillon' and Welsh poppies. Just add sunlight and you have magic - as well as two very good hosts.



RHS Wisley

The BIS Summer Show went well and again the gardens were a joy. The sun was bedazzling and some of the combinations were good enough to copy - if we had the space!

Then it was just a question of opening for the NGS for three days and then off to the W&MIG Iris Show near Gloucester - always a friendly affair and a chance to catch up.

Per Jill - It was quite a challenge to think of a special Golden Exhibit for this Show, lots of ideas came and went but in the end I opted for small selection of photographs of golden iris from our garden in 2024. It was a joy to put together and finding a piece of Kay Elliot's iris fabric, helped even if it did depict bearded!

Per Alun - There was a special prize for a Golden Exhibit to celebrate



W&MIG's 50th Anniversary and to my surprise I won it! It was too late to photograph the exhibit at the end of the show when it was announced, so I did it on our return. It was three spikes of 'Cloud over Clee' bred by one of W&MIG's founder members, Jennifer Hewitt.



The beginning of June brought the first of our spurias into flower, as well as a trip to Claire Austin's garden and nursery as part of the BIS visit. Whilst Claire is better known for bearded irises, there are some beardless in the garden. A stunning group of 'Chance Beauty' was catching the sunlight by her patio. We bought some very healthy and enticing plants from her sales area, including Siberians, so we were well pleased.





Powis Castle

Our spurias continued to improve, but the ones at Powis Castle NT on the 18th June were acting as a magnet, drawing people onto the lower terraces. Large clumps of 'Monspur Cambridge Blue' and *ochroleuca* were set off by the green grass backdrop, many feet below.

On a visit in early spring, we had seen a stoat working his way along the terrace beds. Now, if he was still there, he would have complete cover from the check-by-jowl planting. The repeat use of *Sisyrinchium striatum* in one of the lower beds gave a sense of rhythm.

Our iris year was coming to a close. On trips out we saw the Japanese iris at Biddulph Grange NT and Chatsworth. Crocosmias were starting to add their oranges and reds to the displays. At Chatsworth we saw the last bloom on what we assume to be the English iris, 'King of the Blues'. We ought to try growing them again as they should like our heavy soil better than the Dutch.

On our journey back (4th July), we called in at Yew Tree Cottage to see their *Dierama* collection. It was a very windy day and a bit of wind is wonderful with dieramas, wafting their wands about ... unless of course you want to take a photo! We have not had much luck at Aulden with dieramas, but clearly we need to try again.



Crocoshmia were to the fore in August, at different gardens. One association which caught our eye at Bourton House was with white *Persicaria*. Definitely



worth considering. Jill also noticed the *I. foetidissima* seed there ranging from yellow through to orange: not the white though.

For some *Crocsmia* or *Montbretia* is the thug that went to the council tip or was flung into some hedgerow. On a walk by the Brecon Mountain Railway, it was making an enticing, tranquil scene on a wild bank with bracken by the Pontsticill reservoir. It is exhilarating walking on the forest tracks by the two reservoirs and hearing the occasional steam train. The top reservoir is not as good as the lower; an earthquake caused a fault in the strata and it leaks, but you would never know it.

So into September with autumn *Crocus* starting.

We are still trying different ones and seeing what might work, if the field mice don't get there first. This wet year has brought a lot of rebloom to the Siberians. Usually, our clay dries too much for this to happen. Other joys were the *Gladiolus papilio* and *Hesperantha*. In fact on our trip to Cornwall in October, the *Hesperantha* lining the road to Porthleven were glistening, or how about this one in Gillan.



But whilst our year was winding down, it was not over. We were involved in setting up the Virtual shows for the BIS & W&MIG. Members produce such an interesting range of exhibits. It is kind of them to share and fascinating for us to see.

Likewise, it was kind of Gainsborough House to organise the exhibition of paintings by Cedric Morris and Arthur Lett-Haines. Whilst Cedric is currently known for his bearded irises, he was also interested in the species as the *Yearbook* articles show. In fact, he had a wide interest in plants. Placing the paintings of the two artists together clearly displayed their different styles and you get the feeling (probably wrongly) that you could identify which of the two had painted a picture without looking at the



Florilegium , Gainsborough House

signature. There was also the *Florilegium* of his bearded irises by modern artists on display - we were full of admiration for the curator - it was so well arranged to suit the room.

The year is ending by repeating the spring flooding and limiting what we can achieve in the garden. About 4 vehicles have come to grief within a few hundred yards of our house. 'Don't drive through flood water' doesn't need underlining.



A fuller version of this article will be available in video format on our website.

Crocus concinnus
'Alacbeli'
31st December 2024

Group Contact:
Alun Whitehead
admin@beardlessiris.org
www.beardlessiris.org



