



Louisianas

Another Side Of The Iris Family

By Heather Pryor

Many of you will be aware of good garden practice and the growing culture and regime required for the bearded iris family. This has been so very well shown via the outstanding exhibits at the annual HSOC Iris Shows over the years. This article will consider the 'other side of the family' – the beardless irises – and, in particular, Louisiana irises.

Though both bearded and beardless (Louisiana) iris grow from rhizomes and are spring-flowering, there are a number of very distinct differences in their culture. The lists below are not exhaustive, but have been prepared in a genuine attempt to assist gardeners to understand the differences and to then accommodate the different 'sides of the family' in their home garden more effectively.

Much of the international breakthrough and 'cutting edge' hybridising of Louisiana irises has been carried out in Australia by a small group of enthusiasts since the 1980s. Much work has been done to:

- improve the stamina of flowers, ensuring that most modern hybrids will hold their flowers for at least three days (per flower)
- improve the strength of the flowering stalks so that they can hold the flower stalk erect in all weathers
- improve the bud-count so that each bud 'socket' holds two flower buds
- improve the colour-fast attributes of flowers (no milky-white fade-out)
- improve disease-resistance, by adhering to a strict and diligent regime of removing disease-prone seedlings and cultivars from general circulation
- create new colours (orange, broken colour, plicata patterns).

Most of the Australian-bred Louisiana irises generally available from mail order nurseries here in Australia have been bred for good general garden (not necessarily aquatic garden) appeal, for show-

BEARDED IRIS	LOUISIANA IRIS
have the '3 petals up/3 petals down' petal configuration	have 6 petals which open like a hibiscus
must have the rhizome planted above the ground	have their rhizomes planted under the ground
like very little mulch - no mulch is best	like rhizomes covered with mulch
are generally dormant in winter	are semi-evergreen in winter
are fed sparingly in April and August	are fed every month or so
like no nitrogenous fertiliser	like lots of nitrogenous fertiliser
love a cold winter	will grow happily in a cold climate
hate high humidity areas	love high humidity
prefer alkaline soil and fertiliser	need acidic soil and fertiliser
prefer full sun gardens	will grow in full sun, part shade, near water (in a bog) or in water

bench attributes or both. You should feel confident in growing these very low-maintenance cultivars, which will reward you with lovely spring blooms for very little effort (when compared to higher maintenance plants like roses, for example).

Much of the work done in Australia, in our (generally) drier garden locations than those found in their original Louisiana iris homeland of the southern USA states, have opened the doors for these irises to now be grown in 'dry' states like California, Arizona, etc. with great



success. Locally, we have some of our cultivars growing very happily in central Australia and northern Western Australia.

The cold-hardiness of Louisiana irises has also been proven. A major collection (starting from the five original species and running up through the decades to modern hybrids) is now growing in upstate New York, USA. The garden is located on the shores of Lake Ontario (just south of the Canadian border). Despite the extremes of temperature, the irises still thrive while grown under many feet of winter snow on an annual basis. These cultivars flower a month later than in the state of Louisiana, but there has been no difference in the flowering quality or plant growth shown by the colder climate regime.

If Louisiana irises are provided with:

- a) good, rich acidic soil,
- b) good acidic fertiliser on a regular basis,
- c) adequate regular watering (weekly at minimum), and
- d) are adequately mulched (we use sugar cane mulch)

then they will perform well for you in your garden, bog or water environment.

Hybridisation in Australia has increased the colour palette with good strong yellow, pink, red, sunset and purple-coloured cultivars now readily available. The most popular colours requested by the gardening public remain yellow, white and blue (i.e. gentian blue), but as the modern Australian hybrids are grown more



'Kakadu Sunset' (Pryor)

widely, this trend is changing and people are now wanting to try the other colours.

Work has also been undertaken by several hybridisers in Australia to lengthen the bloom season. Some are working to create earlier and earlier-blooming cultivars; while others are concentrating their efforts on later-blooming cultivars. These efforts will ultimately extend the general bloom season from its original, pre-1980 period of only two–three weeks out to seven or eight weeks. The bloom season in our garden in Sydney stands at about six–seven weeks at the moment. Gardeners can extend their own bloom seasons by choosing a range of early, mid and late-blooming cultivars. Work is also being done on rare, re-blooming Louisiana irises. These tend to bloom in spring and then again in autumn. Two bloom seasons for the same amount of effort? I like it!

A broader range of shorter-growing Louisiana irises is also being created specifically in Australia for our now smaller garden areas, for small ponds, pots or for growing in front of regular-height cultivars so as to have a tiered effect, etc. These cultivars are generally known as 'Water Sprite' varieties, but have the same good garden habits as the regular-height cultivars.

Bearded irises have been classified for many decades, according to their flower stalk height, species background etc. (i.e. Border Bearded, Intermediate Bearded and Tall Bearded irises); while Louisiana irises are yet to be further classified with flowering height criteria.

In the USA, Louisiana irises are exhibited on the show bench according to each particular cultivar name. So judging there is of 'apples with apples'. In Australia and also in New Zealand, Louisiana irises are generally exhibited on the show bench on a 'by colour' basis. The advent of the shorter-growing 'Water Sprite' cultivars will ultimately cause extra responsibility for show bench judges, as more

intimate knowledge of the true flowering height of a cultivar will need to be taken into consideration when judging a bench full of white or cream cultivars. A shorter-growing 'Water Sprite' (such as 'Alicia Clare' with a registered height of 60 cm) may be being exhibited at its full height limit, but it will look short amongst a 'by colour' class of regular-height cultivars (such as 'Wings of Mercury', with a registered height of 110 cm).



'Alicia Clare' (Pryor)

The WA region of the Iris Society of Australia has already introduced special show bench classes for the shorter-growing cultivars. Their foresight is to be greatly commended. This innovation is 'food for thought' for us all, no doubt.

The new discovery of early plicata patterns in Louisiana irises and the ultra-new discovery of a 'broken colour' trait will keep international hybridisers busy for decades to come. What was thought to be genetically impossible to achieve, colour-wise, even a decade ago, is becoming reality (albeit in its



Plicata 'Feather and Fan' (Pryor)

fledgling, early days of development).

I hope that this information has dispelled some of the myths surrounding Louisiana irises. They are not just 'water iris', but are very much at home in a cottage garden location. We grow our irises in an open field with very limited irrigation to 'breed them tough' for regular garden locations.

Nurseries which grow Louisiana irises in a solely aquatic condition

should reconsider giving their Louisiana iris stock a chance to show what they can really do in an ordinary garden location. The irises will also be delighted to be given the opportunity to 'strut their stuff' to a whole new gardening public.

We can all enjoy these irises in the home garden, and the hybridising work done in Australia to make Louisiana irises tougher and less water-dependent will not be wasted. It all 'sounds like a plan' to me!



'Nancy Tichborne' (Pryor)

Heather Pryor is currently the Hon. Secretary of The RHS of NSW Inc. and was recently awarded its highest honour, the Walter Gates Service Medal in June 2012, for her services to horticulture in NSW.

Also amongst her many achievements, Heather: –

- is former Federal President of the Iris Society of Australia, Inc. (AIS)
- has been an accredited Judge of the ISA since the mid 1980s
- was awarded the Distinguished Merit Award by the Society of Louisiana Irises in the USA
- was awarded the (AIS) Mary Swords Debaillon award for the 'best Louisiana iris' in 2000 and 2004 for 'Hot and Spicy' and 'Peaches in Wine' in the AIS international awards program. These are the first Australian-bred awardee cultivars since the inception of the award system in the mid 1940s
- is co-founder of Iris Haven with her equally qualified husband, Bernard.

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