

The Guardian Gardener's Handbook: An Introduction

Who are we?

The Guardian Gardens program is for the experienced gardener who is ready to take historic iris preservation to the next level. How experienced do you need to be? We recommend that you've successfully grown irises for a minimum of three years, and five or more is better. It wouldn't be sensible to give seriously endangered irises to a novice to experiment with.

Don't despair, though, if you haven't quite reached that level of experience. We will gladly use your help with increasing the populations of rare irises; you can gain your experience in very useful ways. By joining HIPS and learning all you can about optimal iris growing conditions in your part of the world, you can become the kind of gardener that GG needs. Interest and enthusiasm come from the heart; growing irises is a skill you can learn.

What do we guard, and why?

We guard named historic iris plants for future gardeners. That's the short form. The long form is complex. We guard named¹ cultivars² of irises deemed *historic*, defined by HIPS as any iris introduced at least thirty years before the present. In the GG program, we emphasize the *rarest of the rare* irises. Which irises are those? We have a formula to determine that, working with imprecise numbers and educated guesses. Much thought, debate, and even anguish has gone into establishing these lines we've drawn in the sand; they are not perfect, but they are somewhere to start. Anyone who wants to debate them further is welcome to do so in their own time. Meanwhile, let's get on with preservation.

How do we do that?

In the Guardian Gardens program, we seek out historic irises on the edge of extinction and distribute them to program members. We work to confirm identity as

¹ The American Iris Society (AIS) is the world registrar of all except true bulbous irises, which are registered by Royal Dutch Bulbgrowers Association. In Guardian Gardens, we work with irises registered with one or the other, plus irises that are too old to have been registered, but for which there is historic documentation of introduction—that is, the iris was offered for sale commercially. Registration and introduction dates are important pieces of data. Despite the current fad for mispronouncing it, *data* is pronounced DAY-tah. Only the wonderful people who read footnotes learn this important fact.

² The word *variety*, in botany, has a definite meaning pertaining to wild plants (including unchanged wild plants that we grow in our gardens). For domesticated plants—those that have been messed with genetically by humans—we prefer the term *cultivar*, which the amazing horticulturist Liberty Hyde Bailey coined by combining the words *cultivated variety*.

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the irises grow and bloom. When one of these rare irises is firmly established and increasing well, we divide it and distribute it among other GG members. When they have grown it on and it has reached safer population levels, we begin to share it with other HIPS members and, ideally, with a commercial vendor who will put the iris back into commerce.

Does it work?

Indeed it does. We have increased the populations of old irises that were down to one identified clump. It is an imperfect system, based on our best educated estimates of population levels and identity, but yes, it works.

Can—and should—we save them all?

We cannot. Many, probably most, of the irises introduced in the past have faded into the mists of time. Some irises with lovely flowers, or flowers in exciting new colors, have been lost because the plants lacked vigor. Others were lovely only in the eye of the breeder and no one else cared enough to grow them. Some were excellent in flower and health, but were not widely enough distributed to survive. Some won awards without truly deserving them (and were therefore more widely grown), and some deserved awards but did not win them (and therefore remained obscure). Others are still out there, but their names are lost, and they're impossible to identify, as we have no adequate photos or descriptions.

“Should we try to save them all?” is another question that's debated endlessly. In the end, people will grow what they love and what interests them, which is as it should be. Save what you can. The Guardian Garden program can help you do it.

Where to find HIPS & the AIS: See “Contacts & Useful Links” elsewhere in this handbook.