

RESCUING THE LANKOW HISTORIC IRIS COLLECTION

by Charles Carver

George and Carla Lankow, residents of the Seattle area and friends and mentors of mine, were longtime iris collectors. George's first wife, Carol (deceased), was a well-awarded hybridizer of dwarf and median bearded irises. His second wife, Carla, worked with what are called the 40-chromosome or sino-sib group of irises, a challenging hybridizing arena. She had also amassed a considerable and noteworthy collection of historic bearded irises over 50 years, mostly TB, but also a lot of MDB, SDB, and bearded species. Her noid TB collection was in itself regarded as important. Carla's iris collection also included Siberians, Japanese, Louisianas, versicolors, and robustas, and a number of beardless species and species crosses.



Justin & Debora - current owners & historic iris heroes

All told there were well over a thousand irises in the collection. (Robustas are a species cross involving beardless *Iris virginica* and *I. versicolor*.)

In 2014, personal circumstances compelled the Lankows to sell their home and gardens. With that they began the dispersal of their iris collection and a number of other horticultural collections. George had maintained an almost complete collection of Carol's introductions. Divisions of that entire collection were retired to Presby Memorial Iris Gardens in Montcalm, New Jersey. Friends and acquaintances accepted the rest of the divisions. I persuaded some family members to take the lion's share of the Louisiana collection. Patrick Spence of Cascadia Iris Gardens, President of the Society for Japanese Irises, and a close friend of the Lankows, absorbed everything of note in the Japanese collection. He also took charge of her 40-chromosome seedlings, which he commented were the premier collection of them anywhere. He has since introduced one, 'Rubicon', and it has garnered some attention. Carla had shown me photos of those seedlings in previous years, and I thought they

were among the most beautiful and unusual irises I have ever seen. The Siberians, mostly of modern vintage, were dug somewhat randomly by friends and probably some family members, and unfortunately no records were kept—a circumstance oft repeated that season.

I came to the garden in July of that year to select from the MDB and SDB beds, look for some specific beardless irises, Carla's pink setosas, and some historic Siberians, as well as to meet with Jack Finney of Oregon to sort through the TB collection and select some diploids for his collection and mine. I had helped the Lankows divide their collections in the past and already had most of what I was interested in, but wanted some backups and to gather more of the historic dwarf

varieties not available in previous digs. Jack and I spent most of the day among the historic TB and re-tagged a lot of the collection for a group coming in August to dig on behalf of the Denver Botanic Gardens. Later in the day, when I turned to the MDB and SDB beds, I found they had already been dug over, and the collection was in disarray, with baskets and tags scattered about and whole plants gone. Most of the best and rare varieties had already been dug by a gentleman who placed them in a collection owned by someone who wished to remain anonymous and I could not—have not been able to—obtain an inventory of what was taken, one of those curious and unfortunate obstacles one occasionally encounters in conservation circles.

I was saddened to see portions of this collection dispersed without documentation. Additionally, I learned that some people had simply come and dug irises without even consulting the family, who were preparing the house for sale at that time. Without maps, I could not locate some of the Siberians I had hoped to save, but did find 'Two Worlds' (Tamberg, 1983), which a family member

encouraged me to take entirely, instead of just a division. Since I believed it to be quite rare, I dug all of it. I was very disappointed not to locate 'Zest' (Sturtevant, 1934) one of only three Siberians she introduced, because I was concerned that Carla's clone was the last remaining remnant of it.

The Lankow home sold that fall, and over the winter of 2014-2015 I wrote a letter to the new owners, whose names I did not even know, telling them about the collection they had just inherited and asking permission to save more of the collection. I sent it to the home address and about a month later received a response from Debora Hurn and her husband, Justin Hayward, who had purchased the home and were interested in assisting the preservation of the collection. In May, while returning from the Hips Annual Meeting in Portland, Oregon, I met with Debora and we looked over the garden together. I identified and she tagged a number of irises as reference points for orienting a digging team in July. Debora and Justin decided they did not want to keep the collection—or most of the garden—because it was too much for them as a working couple to maintain. They did, however, mark specific irises they wanted to keep. My primary motivation was to locate and capture 'Zest', and I had brought a detailed description of it from the Siberian Comprehensive Check List. I marked an iris I thought might be it.

Returning home, I set about trying to assemble a digging team, contacting HIPS, the

Guardian Gardens program (GG), some folks at the Species Iris Group of North America (SIGNA), and sending a message to the King County Iris Society (KCIS). I was very fortunate to engage Terry Bates, the Lankow's former gardener, plant enthusiast, and iris lover, who knew the garden very well. Doug Paschall of HIPS and GG was extraordinarily helpful in assembling the team, and sent a detailed list of irises in the collection that he wanted to acquire for GG. A number of KCIS members stepped forward, and Mike Unser, who was very familiar with Carla's historic collection, and his companion Daniel Hershly offered to come up from Olympia to help for a day. Doug Paschall also located two people, Janiece Broderick of Utah and Jerry Ware of Texas, to host the noid collection.

The dig date was set for Saturday, Sunday, and Monday, July 11-12, 2015. On the Friday evening before the dig, Terry Bates and I met with Debora for a reconnaissance and to discuss the ground rules for the dig: no random digging; permission required to divide or take cuttings from anything other than irises; leave selected irises; clean up and weed the beds we work in.

In three days of digging, we removed over 500 kinds of iris: historic TB (300+), historic MDB, SDB, the entire bearded species collection, and selections from among the beardless varieties. Every day began with me arriving at about 8:00AM, Terry shortly after, and we set up the work tables and boxes for sorting the divisions, and clarified the day's agenda. When the dig team arrived at 10:00, we organized ourselves into work groups to 1) locate and dig cultivars, 2) divide, process, and label fans and sort for distribution, and 3) clean up and weed ahead of and after the dig. We usually worked until about 5:00PM. Terry and I rarely left the site before 7:00. The core of the team over the three days was Terry Bates, John and Linda Vacchiery (all of KCIS), and me.

Day 1: HIPS members Mike Unser and Daniel Hershly came from Olympia and Patti Ensor traveled 300 miles from Spokane to join us. Mike was the most experienced iris historian among us. He was particularly helpful with identifying irises in overcrowded beds



The rescue team, on our knees to the goddess Iris

and, after reviewing the inventory, noted what were most uncommon varieties.

Day 2: KCIS members Patrice Rossano, Caroline Zebroski, Mike Ewanciew, and the home owner Debora Hurn joined the dig.

Day 3: Patrice Rossano came to assist again in the morning, and some neighbors, Janet Pinckney and her daughter Casey, spontaneously showed up and offered to help.

A lot of thought and planning had gone into preparing for this rescue: tools needed; how to organize the team; streamlining the dig; organizing the distribution. The reality on the ground was challenging. Every day involved a different group of people with varying experience and different skills and personalities, but gratefully always eager to help. Team members arrived at differing times, so groups assigned to tasks had to be adjusted. After a year of neglect the gardens were in disarray, heavily weeded, and covered in leaf debris from surrounding canopies of dense forest. A lot of tags were gone or misplaced, the collection was way overcrowded, and entire plants had been taken. And since the time that Debora and Justin acquired the property, and even up until the week before the dig, people had continued to come onto the property and steal irises.

The tagging system—home-manufactured aluminum tags with indented names—was never user-friendly. These were small, difficult to locate and read, often wrinkled and twisted, and thus doubly hard to read—and the maps were no more than lists. Each row consisted of a series of columns with 3-4 varieties in each column. While the rows were easy to identify, the columns were planted too close and often confused

because they had grown into one another. Occasionally an iris would be found growing between the rows as if randomly placed, and the noids were dispersed among the historic, rather than separating them to prevent any additional confusion. Sometimes varieties with PBF were planted side by side rather than spacing them and using them as identifying features to maintain orientation in the garden.

I knew the historic TBs had been divided in 2010, as I had helped. I thought they had also been divided in 2013, but that was not apparent. By the end of Day 1, Mike Unser had rightly commented that we should regard the identity of every iris as suspect. If not for the re-tagging that Jack Finney and I had done in 2014 and those that Debora Hurn and I had marked in May, we would have had an even more difficult situation. I remember commenting to Doug Paschall later that, while we had saved the collection, I was not confident we had saved their identities. We dug a number of irises from the beardless beds whose identities are entirely in question. I expect it will take years to sort them out.

For me, the crowning moment came the last evening of the dig, just a couple of hours before finishing. Terry and I, equipped with “maps,” went



Some of our hearty band: Front row - Patti Ensor, John & Linda Vacchiery; Back row - Mystery helper [Ed. note: I'm thinkin' Charlie], Mike Unser, & Terri Bates. Daniel Hershly took the photo.

to the Siberian beds. We oriented ourselves from Siberian iris ‘**Sugi Iri**’ (Wood, circa 1980), which I had identified in May, and the iris I had tentatively marked as possibly being ‘Zest’ seemed to be correctly positioned. I am hopeful that I have rescued it. I returned home with a whole truckload of plants. It took most of a week to process them further, pack and ship them all over the county, fill last minute requests, and pot those gathered for my own collection.

Before Terry and I departed, we made arrangements to return in September to dig the Siberians and spend more time in the beardless beds. There were not many historic, but we thought we would salvage everything we could, look for the *Iris cristata* collection and some miscellaneous beardless species, and honor our agreement with Debora and Justin to remove the collection. The beardless beds were even more confusing than the historic TBs. We spent all of that beautiful fall day trying to sort the collection out and digging everything of interest, weeding and grading as we progressed.



Siberian ‘**Polly Dodge**’ (McEwen, 1972) Don McQueen photo

I owe a special thanks to Terry Bates, who was there every day of our two different digging sessions, who brought her familiarity with the garden, her good humor, patience, and unflinching work ethic. It is hard to imagine that the rescue could have proceeded as successfully as it did without her. We hope to return to the Lankow garden this spring and attempt to identify what little remains. I want to extend additional thanks to the durable and dependable John and Linda Vacchieri for their 3 long days of spirited labor. This was an inter-iris society venture: GG, HIPS, King County Iris Society, and AIS National Collections, all working to the same end, a co-operative spirit we need to foster in our rescue efforts.

Rescuing the Lankow garden was a big learning experience. The obstacles we confronted, though frustrating, compelled me to consider further how to organize collections to protect the identities of the cultivars. I had begun organizing my collection by hybridizer and have continued that, and where possible have geographically separated the beds so there would be no confusion about the identity of who bred an introduction. This will assist in the event of misplacement or deterioration of a plant marker.

My own beds had become crowded, because in an effort to collect as many irises as possible, I had planted them closely. I am now providing more space in the event they aren’t divided as often as they should be. I have separated noids entirely, and irises with PBF are separated as well, so they can provide additional identity information. I plan to invest in plant markers that are more durable and do not fade. Though more expensive, these will reduce the labor of making tags and maintaining the tagging system I currently use. To that end, I am researching the various commercial brands and styles available to compare durability and cost-effectiveness. Mapping, of course, is simply indispensable as an identification aid, and should be regarded as requisite.

Preservation of the irises themselves is not sufficient. Just as significantly, we must preserve identity, because once a cultivar’s identity is lost, it is not so easily recovered. In fact, most likely that identity will not be recovered, and for all practical purposes the iris suffers the “extinction” of anonymity. There are thousands of irises that have suffered this fate; the sheer number of noids is evidence of that. ☞