



THE IRISES OF TEXAS
ARE UPON YOU

Argyle Acres

BY PEGGY HEINKEL-WOLFE

PHOTOGRAPHS BY MICHAEL AMADOR

After Donna and Joe Spears built their dream house in the wooded hills north of Fort Worth, they had no money left for landscaping. But as luck would have it, Joe's mother and sister in Bellevue needed to thin their iris beds just then. They gave the couple two historic varieties of the regal flower, one a smoky violet, the other a delicate combination of yellow and pink.

"We didn't even know what kinds of irises they were at first," Joe Spears says. During his search to learn the registered names of the flowers, which soon naturalized among the thick stand of post oak trees that surrounds their log home, Joe became hooked. The violet flower's name was Sindjkha, a variety dating to 1918; the yellow-and-pink beauty was Quaker Lady, dating to 1909. The latter, Joe and Donna learned, may have been the first hybrid iris introduced in the United States. The flowers' beauty and hardiness, as well as their history, fascinated the couple and

inspired the business they have been in for 11 years: collecting and selling both modern and historic irises.

What began as a hobby in the 1980s grew into Argyle Acres, the Spears' home-based business, which now boasts more than 1,700 varieties of Texas-hardy, bearded irises. With more than 600 old varieties in the collection, Argyle Acres is among the nation's top five suppliers of historic irises. Customers include the National Museum of American History, part of the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., and the Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site, in Brookline, Massachusetts.

Despite the pleasure of supplying such notable customers, Joe says he and Donna enjoy introducing irises to gardening novices just as much. "Irises are really so easy," he says. "I tell people to water them only twice—the day they plant them and the next day." After that, normal Texas rainfall takes care of the rest. In fact, irises "summer over" better without extra water, Joe says.



Irises as far as the eyes can see. Argyle Acres near Fort Worth grows more than 1,700 varieties of the elegant flower, including Queen of May (facing page). During last year's annual open days, Joe Spears (above) picked Praiseworthy, Nightfall, Russet Wings, and other irises for floral arrangements that were on view in the display garden.



Suzanne Feit and her daughter Kathy Bernhardt admire a variety of irises, including Love the Sun and Cinnamon Girl, and make wish lists for their own gardens.

Most irises bloom about the same time that equally plucky wildflowers, such as Indian paintbrush, winecups, and bluebonnets, peak in spring. Unlike wildflowers, though, irises have elegant, spiked foliage that can look good most of the year. Even better, some varieties are re-bloomers that send out another rush of color in the fall.

Taking its name from the Greek goddess of the rainbow, who linked heaven and earth along her silken robe of many colors, *Iris*—a genus with 300 species and in the same botanical family as gladiolus and freesia—blooms in almost the entire rainbow of colors. True red is the only hold-out. “Many hybridizers have tried to make a red iris,” Joe says. “Getting that color would be like finding the Holy Grail.”

Arlington resident Vincent Christopher, who crossbreeds irises and introduces several new varieties each year through Argyle Acres, says that a few bearded irises have red in the beard (that is, the bushy hairs that extend onto the “falls,” the name for the lower three petals). Because

pink irises contain lycopene, the same substance that makes tomatoes red, Vincent believes that someday someone will produce an entirely red flower.

Hybridizers create new varieties to produce flowers with better color, longevity, or other qualities destined to make a best-seller. One such winner, with lacy, ruffled petals of coral-pink, is the Beverly Sills, an all-time favorite developed in 1979 and named for the renowned American soprano. Others fetch prizes at one of the American Iris Society’s many regional iris shows. At the annual show organized by the Fort Worth Iris Society (April 17, 2004, at the Fort Worth Botanic Garden), the Spears have walked away

with “best historic,” “queen of show,” “sweepstakes,” and other top prizes.

Most irises can bring subtle and sophisticated fragrances into the house. Others bring to mind childhood treats, such as the smell of Grape Nehi soda that wafts from irises named Grape Situation and Grapette. Bearded irises can have unseen plant properties that produce unexpected aromas. (September Sailor smells uncannily like root beer.) On the other hand, there are a few strikingly beautiful blooms that do not smell very good, and Donna suggests that they simply stay in the garden.

Historic varieties (defined as those more than 30 years old) remain a passion for the Spears and attract the attention of garden designers in cities far and near. For example, Tower Grove Park, in St. Louis, Missouri, and the Bayless-Selby House, in Denton, selected Victorian-era irises appropriate for their historic-preservation projects. After Donna discovered that financier Henry Shaw had donated the land for Tower Grove Park,



The deep-purple variety known as Tom Johnson was created in 1996.

she sent the park several rhizomes of the historic variety that bears Shaw's name. "Little things like that happen all the time, and that makes it a lot of fun," she says.

For four years, Joe served as president of the Historic Iris Preservation Society, a national branch of the American Iris Society that works to identify and preserve varieties at least 30 years old. Joe is quick to point out that historic varieties aren't necessarily the most expensive ones. "Older varieties aren't always rare, so supplies make them inexpensive. Sometimes they're just hardy, and that's why they're still around and popular," he says. Swertii, a small iris with markings on the lower petals that look like rows of blue embroidery stitches, is one of the earliest irises recorded in European horticulture. It dates to 1612 and is the oldest variety grown at Argyle Acres.

Each April, the Spears open their hilltop garden for free visits most afternoons. Visitors are welcome to walk among the terraced beds, where markers identify the hundreds of varieties. Although not open to the public, one field north of Argyle and another near Keller have hundreds more varieties. During the open days, the Spears go to the fields nearly every evening to cut flowers and bring them back to the display garden. The blooms, their identification tags twirling in the breeze, fill big, green glass vases on a dozen tables placed

around the house. Dappled light shines through the oak trees as if spotlighting the flowers, making the garden a favorite spot for artists to do a bit of plein-air painting.

When Argyle Acres is open, the Spears enlist the help of Denton County Master Gardeners to answer questions on new varieties and ways to care for irises. Although visitors come from as far away as Iowa and Montana, most are Texans who drive out each year. Many, in fact, have made a tradition of visiting on Easter Sunday, still dressed in their finery but outfitted with sturdy walking shoes. "They are repeat customers, back for more new plants," says Master Gardener Tina Litherland of Argyle.

Some visitors find their appreciation for irises deepening just as it did for the Spears. Rindie Egan of Colleyville rustled several old varieties of irises after she stumbled upon them blooming determinedly in the abandoned garden of a house being torn down. A frustrated beginning gardener, she was thrilled when the plants thrived. "Other kinds of plants that I bought never made it," says Rindie.

Later, when Rindie visited Argyle Acres (whose Web site she had used in an effort to ID her new plants), the display garden renewed her hope for a green thumb.

After all, even when there is money left over for landscaping, any gardener wants that spray of color and beauty that will last longer than a rainbow. ★

ESSENTIALS It's Iris Time

THE DISPLAY GARDEN

Argyle Acres will open daily 12-5 p.m. from Sat., Apr. 10 through Sun., Apr. 25, 2004 (closed Apr. 16).

Much of the garden is wheelchair accessible. To reach the garden from I-35 West, take Exit 76 and travel east on FM 407 about 1.6 miles to Stonecrest Rd. Turn south on Stonecrest, and travel a half-mile; turn west on Forest Trail, and travel 0.6 miles; turn south on Pioneer Circle to 910 Pioneer Circle East. Write to Argyle Acres Iris Garden, 910 Pioneer Circle East, Argyle 76226-6714; 940/464-3680; email irises@argyleacres.com; www.argyleacres.com. (Along with a map and a glossary, the Web site includes more than 800 photos and descriptions of Texas-hardy, bearded irises.)

CLUBS Texas has 14 local clubs affiliated with the American Iris Society (national convention is Apr. 19-24 in Fresno, California). Among the most active clubs: **Fort Worth Iris Society** (annual show Apr. 17, 2004, at the Fort Worth Botanic Garden), Peggy Harris, Pres., 2606 Whitehaven St. North, Colleyville 76034; www.fortworthiris.org. **Iris Society of Austin**, Pat Byrne, Pres., 1102 Aster, Katy 77493. **South Plains Iris Society**, Dr. Billy Skillman, Pres., 5402 26th St., Lubbock 79407. **Texoma Iris Society**, Martha McDowell, Pres., Box 338, Anna 75409. **Waco Iris Society**, Sue Swanner Coffelt, Pres., Box 443, Clifton 76634. **Piney Woods Iris Society**, John Middleton, Pres., Rt. 3, Box 218, Mount Pleasant 75455. For a complete list of Texas clubs, visit www.irises.org.

BOOKS Look for the following books in your library or bookstore: *The World of Irises*, ed. by Bee Warburton (American Iris Society, 2nd printing, 1986). *The Louisiana Iris* by Marie Cailliet (Timber Press, 2000). *The Gardener's Iris Book* by William Shear (Taunton Press, 2002). and *Iris, Flower of the Rainbow* by Graeme Grosvenor (Simon & Schuster Intl., 1999).

PEGGY HEINKEL-WOLFE is an award-winning freelance arts and culture writer. Several dozen irises, between an unruly wisteria and a tenacious red-hot poker, grace the flower bed in front of her home in Argyle.

The abundant varieties of irises at Argyle Acres amazed staff photographer MICHAEL AMADOR. Though a Denton native, he had never visited this floral fantasia near his hometown.



Donna Spears arranges lovely bouquets of (left to right) Sterling Stitch, Indigo Princess, and Wings of Gold.