

True Grit

Anti-viral edition 3

April 2020

Spring has Sprung

Even more

Iris Edition

Members pictures from
mid March to mid April

From David Stephens, 17th March 2020

I have one Iris in flower today, a pogon from its only known location on the Maltese island of Gozo. Not the prettiest flower, the segments are always untidy and crumpled, but certainly the rarest pogon and this is probably the only plant in cultivation . It is

Iris pseudopumila gozoensis



Iris attica

There are several species of Pogon Iris that may be categorized as dwarf. One of the nicest is *Iris attica* from Greece, other parts of the Balkans and western Turkey.

Like most of the other dwarf species it comes in a variety of colour forms, but predominantly yellow or purple. It could be confused with *Iris suaveolens* which grows in the same geographical areas, but for a difference in the spathes.

They have virtually no stem but have long perianth tubes which gives the impression that they do indeed have stems. They are sweet smelling but the purple form has a



nicer heavier scent than the yellow.

They are not difficult to grow in very well drained soil but they intensely hate winter wet combined with cold and are safer in a pot or frame over winter. They need frequent replanting as the rhizomes quickly multiply and crowd themselves and exhaust their soil.

David Stephens

This yellow form is from Bob Charman



Iris lineata

is a member of the Regelia section of Iris. It is a rhizomatous perennial from the mountains of Turkestan, Tajikistan and Afghanistan, growing on dry rocky open slopes of granite mountain and is rare.

Last year I was fortunate in that I managed to flower this Iris. It is difficult to grow, along with all of the Oncocyclus and Regelia irises. It needs to be grown in well drained soil in full sun in alpine house conditions. I grow this plant in a clay long tom pot which is plunged in a sand bed in the same way as I grow Oncocyclus Iris

As soon as growth starts in early spring I water and feed with a high potash feed, small amounts at first but increasing as the seasons progress. It is now

in the lap of the gods as to whether you get a flower or not. Once the leaves of the plant start to go down you must stop all water and feed, until the next spring.



The British Iris Society in 1979 gave us detailed instructions on cultivation, however, I find many of these Iris resent disturbance so I do not replot every year.

Bob Charman



Still two more buds to go!! I bought this *Onco-cyclus, Iris susiana*, from Plantworld Holland in September 2016. Potted in J13 with an equal amount of grit it has grown steadily, flowering its best this year. It is occasionally given a high potash liquid feed and allowed to dry out when dormant in summer. Plantworld has some beautiful pictures of Irises on the website www.plantworldholland.nl which are worth viewing.

Joy Bishop



Editors note; In Brian Mathew's book 'The Iris' he gives an interesting account of this species. It was collected in 1573 and almost certainly has been vegetatively propagated ever since so we have only one clone. The original population from which it was collected is not now in existence.

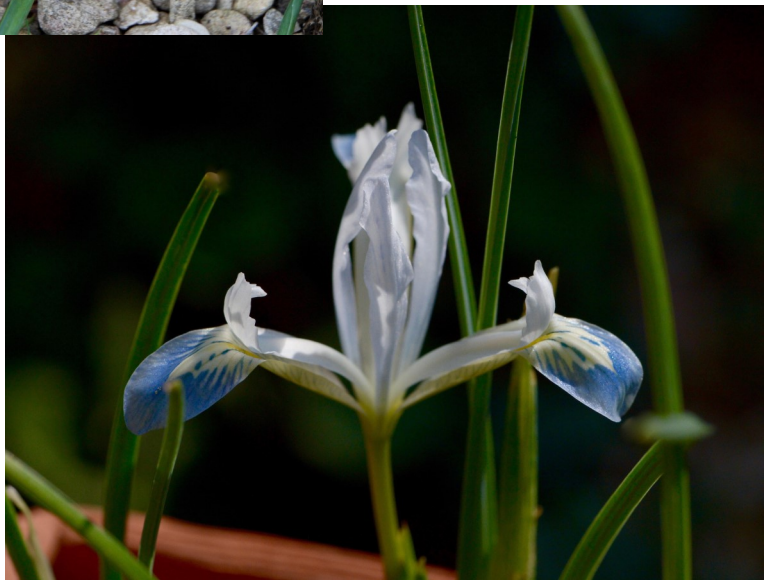
From Brian's garden.

Pictures and caption by Brian Mathew



Iris Frozen Planet

This attractive pale iris of the reticulate bulb group was registered with KAVB (the Dutch Bulbgrowers Association) by Fa.J.E Lievens & Zn in 2016. Its colour was described as White 155C and light Violet-blue 95D [RHS Colour chart]. It is very similar to one named about 10 years ago 'Blue Ice' by John Fielding who picked it out of a batch of mixed *Iris reticulata* in a garden centre. That cultivar is also shown here for comparison. In the recent RHS trial of 'reticulatas' at Hyde Hall 'Frozen Planet' did not perform well and was not recommended for an award.





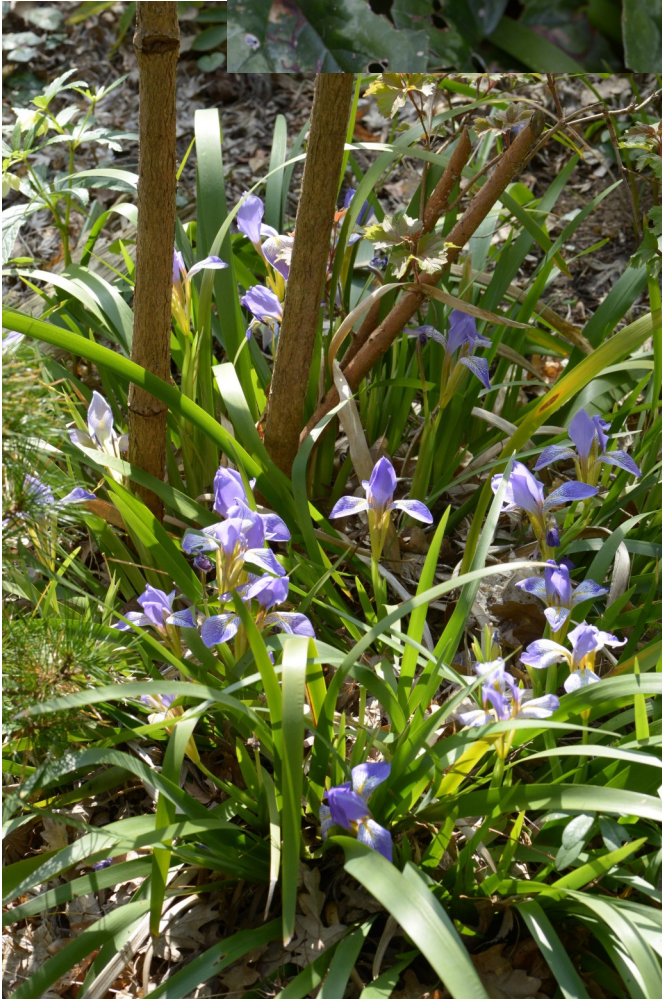
Iris henryi

This tiny Iris from Eastern China has been growing here outside in the garden for several years now and is really tough, forming large tufts of long narrow leaves. It remains undamaged by frosts and flowers quite freely in April, although mollusc damage is a problem just as it is with *I. unguicularis*. We have two forms, one pale lilac and the other white with a yellow exterior so that its buds give the impression it will be a yellow flower. The latter one is also a more compact plant. Both of them send out stolons that provide a useful method of propagation.



Iris lazica

from the eastern Black Sea coastal region of Turkey, has been flowering profusely this year since Christmas and still going in early April. Several forms have been accumulated, most from Jennifer Hewitt of the BIS. The darkest of



them, a deep rich violet, doesn't have such well-shaped flowers as the others. The form I prefer originates from Richard Nutt, probably one he collected in Turkey, and those flowers are perfectly shaped. The large clump shown here is the original one I had and planted many years ago, it just keeps spreading. Plenty of seeds are produced but you have to delve right down among the leaves to find the capsules. The species is of course related to *I. unguicularis* but unlike that it performs best in a cooler position, after all it grows in the wild among the hazel bushes and rhododendrons in its homeland.

Brian Mathew

Iris in troughs

I have five of Mike's splendid troughs. Three have fairly standard alpine bits and pieces in them, but two are dedicated to Iris.

Dwarf pogon Iris can be a bit tricky, some grow well for a year or two and then fade away. They need special growing conditions to persist, fierce drainage and frequent division into fresh soil seems to suit them best. In a trough this can be more easily achieved.

The troughs are placed in the sunniest place I have and stay there unless we have really severe conditions, particularly prolonged winter rain. It is just possible to lift them under shelter, or to cover them, dry cold is no problem; they are dormant. The soil I use is one part JJ, one part sharp grit, and one part old lime mortar (not easy to obtain unless you have a medieval property in Somerset). The plants are divided every three or four years into fresh soil as they begin to crowd themselves out and exhaust the old soil.

I have successfully grown *Iris attica*, *pumila*, *reichembachii*, *suaveolens* and *timofejewii* this way. The one lesson I have learnt is not to include *Iris reticulata*, although the conditions suit them, as you can see in the photos the leaves are out of place.



Iris suaveolens

David's troughs on his terrace wall at Dorking.





Iris pumila

Iris pumila is one of the trinity of stemless dwarf pogon Iris. The other two are of course *Iris attica* and *Iris suaveolens*.

This particularly striking form of *pumila* came to me as a Jim Archibald collection JJA199.590 As I hold Jim's archive, I can confirm that number does not exist so we are none the wiser as to this plant's origin.

However, it is a stunningly beautiful addition to the dwarf Iris trough, as is..

Iris 'Peloponnese Snow'

Or to be more precise - *Iris unguicularis* subsp. *carica* var. *angustifolia* cv. 'Peloponnese Snow'

David Stephens



***Iris bucharica* 'Top Gold'**

'I purchased this Iris in the autumn of 2017 from RarePlants, as a reasonably easy Juno. I thought it would be a good place to start. So far I have had no problems; it grows in a mix of J1 No3 and grit, with the roots in the compost, the bulb resting on the surface and then covered with about 7cm of course grit. The pot is kept dry through the summer and not watered until November and then not again until growth is visible. So far it has doubled in size every year, so I may try some in the garden next year'.

William Rook



This lovely *Iris rosenbachiana* grown from JJA seed 15 years ago, flowers reliably very early in the year but is still only one bulb.



Perfect Harmony

Linda likes to have a tub of spring bulbs at the doorstep but has been plagued by squirrels. She plants bulbs to come up in succession then covers the surface with Pansies. These act as a decoy until the bulbs can take care of themselves. Linda is a musician so it is perfectly reasonable that the Iris is Harmony.

Iris sari

Grown from seed from another member, further proof that it is not always what you know so much as who you know. Probably most of us have plants that are the result of the generosity of fellow members. I have many and they serve as a constant reminder of my friends.

The seed germinated quickly probably due largely to it being fresh and sown in the autumn.



Compost for the Annual Potting Up.

For several years we have been having one or two 40 sack pallets of John Innes compost delivered from Keith Singleton in Cumbria. It isn't like the original JI but it is consistent and everyone who has used it has come back for more. Unfortunately, because of the coronavirus Keith does not feel he can accept an order this year. Paul has been making his own JI ever since he found a reliable source of loam. Knowing this I asked, on your behalf, if he and Colin would be willing to tell us about it. We may all want to do something similar this year. They have very kindly supplied the following explanation for which I, for one, am very grateful, together with a couple of examples of the fabulous plant for which they use their JI .



Fritillaria liliacea

Grown by Colin in his fritillaria mix. See end of following page. Note the use of 50% cat litter

Astragalus coccineus

Grown by Paul in the Alpine Mix described. This is a plant that is very fussy about its habitat in the wild, growing in desert foothills of California. Anyone who has tried to grow it knows how difficult it is to please.



Making Your Own John Innes Compost

Shop-bought John Innes (JI) compost often proves to be of doubtful and variable quality, with usually far too little loam content. I am not going to go into the reasons for that here, but rather to explain how we make our own JI compost, which is at least consistent from batch to batch.

The original formula of JI composts is 7 parts loam, 3 parts peat and 2 parts grit (all parts by volume) plus fertiliser and a little lime (0.6 grammes per litre of JI). The main difficulty is in obtaining loam that is both of good quality and consistent from batch to batch. We use "Cricket Loam" which as the name suggests is loam that is used by cricket clubs in the preparation or repair of cricket wickets. There are several such loams available that can be obtained from companies specialising in turf care. An internet search for "cricket loam" will quickly find you such suppliers.

While not ideal for compost making, what we like most about these products is that because they have to do a very specific job, they need to have specific qualities and this means they have a published specification. Each batch is prepared to match this specification, so each bag is consistent, taking the guesswork out of how it might perform. Of the types available we have tried two: Boughton Kettering Loam and Boughton Mendip loam, chosen because both of these have a pH a little less than 7 so they are neither alkaline nor very acidic.

To make our own JI we substitute peat with fine grade composted bark, so our JI becomes:

7 parts Cricket loam
3 parts composted bark
2 parts grit

Rather than bother with the traditional fertilisers, we add Vitax Q4 powder instead. Adding 3g of this per litre of JI is equivalent to JI No. 1, 6g per litre for JI No. 2 and 9g per litre for JI No. 3. One good thing about making your own JI is that you can choose whether or not to add any lime. We make ours without lime as standard then add some in if we happen to be potting lime-loving plants.

I said that the cricket loam is not ideal. There are two main problems with it – it contains more fine particles than we would like (so doesn't drain too well), and over time when watered and then allowed to dry, it can set rather like concrete! But with suitable amelioration we have found that it performs satisfactorily. Because every batch is the same, once you have learned how it performs and how, therefore, to handle it, you can be confident that this performance will remain the same too.

As we grow mainly bulbs, plus a few alpinas, drainage is the key thing, so we add plenty of grit and or other drainage materials. For my alpinas I use 2 parts JI, 1 part grit and 1 part Perlite. This improves the drainage markedly. For my South African Bulbs I use equal parts of JI and grit.

For his Fritillaria, Colin uses 1 part JI, 2 parts cat litter and 1 part grit. You will probably want to experiment yourself with such additives to find a mix that works just the way you want it to.

Paul Cumbleton & Colin Everett

Gnorman saw me preparing to take a picture and instantly started smiling and hovering in view. I told him I was working on a special edition of True Grit for Iris lovers. He has been social distancing recently so I took pity on him and let him help me. I became a little concerned when he took out his trowel and offered to make leek and potato soup.

The pots contain Iris Pacific Coast Hybrid seedlings from September '19. I had plenty of seed and one never knows how good the germination will be. Anyway I've sown a bit too closely here. I intend to pot them up individually soon so they can be well established before the heat of the summer detracts from their will to live.

I use square plastic long toms (9x9x13cm) standing on sand in a polystyrene box. The latter keeps the sun off the black pots and allows 12 at a time to be watered by plunging the box in a tray of rainwater. The wet sand gives the roots somewhere to head for and prevents the compost drying out completely.

Anyway I don't think Gnorman heard me correctly because he started doing a little jig and shouted, 'Top of the mornin to ya'. The confusion persisted and next he offered to make an Irish stew with those fine little leeks. I'm Irish, don't ya know. Don't I always wear a green jacket, to be sure.

It's embarrassing; word has gone round that I'm producing a newsletter for Irish Lovers. I hope you enjoy this issue of True Grot whether you are an Irish lover or just like irises.

Have you ever noticed how if you grow Fritillaria they gradually all change into *F. acmopetela*. Well this year my Junos seem to all mature into white flowers with yellow falls.



Bonus Plant

This beautiful Iris was won in the Epsom raffle put there by David a couple of years ago. I admit I'm a bit of a control freak and on a quest to win 'Firsts' at the AGS shows so my natural inclination is to grow everything in a pot. I was told, however, that this would do better in the garden so I obeyed but then it seemed to die soon after planting.

Imagine my delight when I came across these flowers on a sunny Easter Sunday. A bonus plant two times over.



Pacific Coast Hybrid





Iris Nico shown by Tony and Kit

From Quieter Times

To fill the spare page some of the lovely irises we have shown last year in our reports of the Iris shows at Wisley.

A beautiful form of *Iris lactea*



An unusual colour form of *Iris schachtii*