

# Bayou *and* Marsh

*Newsletter of the Greater New Orleans Iris Society*

## We Exist!

### GNO Iris Society is born, takes first baby steps

New Orleans finally has an iris society! Perhaps the bells did not toll at St. Louis Cathedral, but the formation of the Greater New Orleans Iris Society was an event worth noting. Elsewhere around the country where bearded irises are the norm, iris organizations are as common as those devoted to daylilies, roses and other popular garden plants.

But along the Gulf Coast, bearded irises are difficult at best, and the absence of this popular plant – at least prior to the discovery and development of Louisiana irises – has meant the lack of the critical mass of iris growers sufficient to support any local organizations.

#### The Louisiana Irises

Louisiana irises have changed all that, albeit gradually. Their “discovery” in the 1920s and 1930s, the col-



*At first meeting, from left: Mark Schexnayder, Tyrone Foreman, GNO Iris Society President Debbie Hargis, and Peggie Brown.*

lection of natural hybrids for roughly the next 20 years, and the development  
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### *Next Meeting!*

Mark your calendars for **Tuesday, September 11, 2001, 7:30 p.m.** Plan to head over to **Longue Vue House and Gardens** for the next GNOIS meeting, one that will be worth the drive if you want to dig some new iris beds or redo existing plantings.

#### Program

The program will focus on digging and dividing irises and on propagating new plants. Just in time for the fall season. The optimum time to prepare new beds is late August through October, so members can take the information right out into the garden.

#### Plant Swap

And maybe get plants to practice on. Members are encouraged to bring 2-3 varieties to trade with other members. If you are just getting started with irises, bring what ever other nice plants you have to spare. We love irises, but a garden can't be made of irises alone.

# Getting Started

## NOBG Booth and First General Meeting Introduce GNOIS

*New society emphasizes a good first impression and seeks to build its base.*



*Above, left: Patrick O'Connor, Eileen Hollander and Ann Donnelly at the first meeting; below, Betty Rena works on flower arrangement in the NOBG booth; above right: Julie O'Connor in the booth she designed and constructed; immediately above: Fred Noggerath and Eileen Hollander examining part of the booth exhibit after the general meeting in the spring; right: a basket of blossoms and a bucket of irises displayed in the booth.*

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of modern hybrids in the time since has produced worthy garden plants that increasingly fill the niche occupied by bearded irises elsewhere. In fact, it turns out that Louisiana irises can be grown well in virtually every part of the country and in normal beds as well as boggy conditions. And, they are gaining ground on their popular bearded cousins. It is not unusual now for Louisiana iris cultivars to win the iris shows that are commonly sponsored by local iris organizations.

#### **Time To Organize**

With the new recognition of Louisiana irises, a group of growers in the New Orleans area, most members of the Society for Louisiana Irises, the 60 year old national organization devoted to these plants, took the step of organizing the Greater New Orleans Iris Society. Most of those reading this have joined or expressed an interest in joining the new society. We hope to have 75-100 members by the end of the year.

Two meetings have been held and a third is planned for September 11. The first meeting was a small planning/organizational meeting and the second a general meeting at Longue Vue House and Garden in the spring. As the organization gets off the ground, it was decided that emphasis will be on quality of programs rather than frequency of meetings. Once the membership base has been built, we anticipate more frequent and varied activities, shaped by the interests of members.

#### **What We'll Do**

The course of the GNO Iris Society will depend upon the membership. Education undoubtedly will be part of the agenda. The first activity, just a week after the organizational meeting, was to sponsor a booth at the Spring Show at the New Orleans Botanical Garden. A similar booth at the fall show is planned.

Members have expressed an interest in garden tours and opportunities to obtain new varieties of irises. Typically, local nurseries and garden centers handle a limited number of irises, a few Louisianas, the yellow flag *I. pseudacorus*, and occasionally *I. virginica*, which is also a native but not closely related to the Louisiana iris group. Through sales and swaps GNOIS should be able to expand access to a much wider range of cultivars, particularly new Louisiana hybrids.

Iris societies typically sponsor shows and public plantings, or volunteer to help maintain established plantings. An iris show would be an undertaking appropriate for an established organization and may be a future priority. The iris plantings at Longue Vue and the annual "Celebration of the Louisiana Iris" in Jean Lafitte offer those so inclined the opportunity to help out and, undoubtedly, learn a great deal about irises.

#### **Officers**

The first year of GNOIS is regarded as an organizational year. Permanent bylaws have to be adopted and committees named. Officers for the first year are: Debbie Hargis, Baratania, President; Eileen Hollander, New Orleans, Treasurer; and Betty Rena, Metairie, Recording Secretary. The success of the Greater New Orleans Iris Society depends on a corps of active members, so please get involved!

## Louisiana Iris Growing Tips

### **Location**

- Provide at least a half day of sun
- Avoid dense tree roots
- Regular beds are fine; boggy conditions not necessary

### **Soil Preparation**

- Dig in several inches (3-5) of compost or other organic matter
- Work in commercial or organic fertilizer (equivalent of 1 lb of 8-8-8 per 10 square feet of beds)
- If soil is very alkaline, increase acidity
  - Acid soils (around pH 6.5) generally recommend
  - Neutral and slightly alkaline N.O. soils seem okay

### **Planting**

- Space irises with room to "walk" – 9-12 inches apart
- Plant with rhizome just covered with soil – ½ to ¾ inch
- Mulch after planting
  - E.g., pine straw, ground leaves or bark
  - 2-3 inches

### **Maintenance**

- Fertilize established beds in Sep-Oct and again in Feb
  - In fall, 1 lb 8-8-8, or equivalent
  - In spring, half as much
- Discard foliage that yellows
  - Do not compost
  - Decomposed foliage may transmit a minor fungus disease called "rust"
- Keep beds moist
  - Irises in dry beds will go dormant and bloom will be reduced
- Replenish mulch as needed
- Remove seed pods before summer to avoid seedlings among existing plants
- Divide irises after 3-5 years or when they become crowded

# Frenchman Street

## From the “Iris Center of the Universe” to Space Exploration

BY JOSEPH K. MERTZWEILLER

Louisiana irises (series Hexagonae) are experiencing an increasing level of interest and acceptance. These irises are being grown and appreciated all over Louisiana, in many other parts of the country, and in many foreign countries – much more so today than at any time in the past. And all this is just in the nick of time! We will never really know how close Louisiana irises came “to the point of no return.”

The pattern of (1) growth in the wild, (2) discovery and appreciation, (3) depletion in the wild, and (4) transition and improvement under cultivation likely has been no different for Louisiana irises than for most other plants. We hear more and more about “endangered species,” both plant and animal. Countless species have not made it through these four stages and are now extinct. With adverse environmental factors which exist today it becomes more and more difficult for living species to “make it,” so to speak.

Fortunately, Louisiana irises have made it and are now well on their way to world-wide distribution and acceptance. Two important factors, which occurred more than 50 years ago, are primarily

*The late Joseph Mertweiller, a native of New Orleans who lived in Baton Rouge, was an exceedingly active and influential member of the Society for Louisiana Irises for many years. This article originally appeared in the SLI Newsletter in September 1993.*

responsible: (1) the extensive work, explorations and writings of Dr. John K. Small and (2) immediate follow-up of Small’s work by the founding of the Society for Louisiana Irises (1941) and its accomplishments over the past 50 years.

### Prospects

Today, more than ever, Louisiana irises remain on the brink of extinction in the wild, but the outlook as cultivated plants is very promising. Although wild populations are now estimated at less than 10 percent of what they were in

magazines and newspapers.

It would be a great tragedy were the irises to become extinct in the wild. But this remains a distinct possibility. Unfortunately, conditions most responsible for decline in nature are not only still present, but are increasing. To have any chance of saving the remaining wild populations, we must be aware of the factors most responsible for decline and do everything possible to exert some control over these factors. This will be no easy task.

While there are many factors con-



1930, there are increasing numbers of growers who distribute species and hybrids worldwide. The irises are grown in countless private gardens, botanical gardens, arboretums, parks and public gardens. As knowledge of these irises and appreciation of their beauty grows, these efforts are bound to increase. There is also increasing publicity in plant publications, home and garden

contributing to decline in the wild, one of the most important has been municipal and rural development.

### Native Irises in New Orleans

Nowhere has this been more in evidence, and in a shorter period of time, than in and around the city of New Orleans. This was well-documented by Dr. Small, who was keenly aware of the destruction even as he was discovering,

describing and writing about the “new” irises. Small estimated in 1930 that for areas surrounding New Orleans, 80 percent of the iris fields existing 50 years before (in 1880) had been destroyed. He attributed this to “urban growth and rural improvements,” and he makes reference to “remnants of the wreckage of the most wonderful natural iris field yet discovered.” This notation was made when only about 20 percent of the natural populations remained.

The remaining 20 percent did not survive for long, probably not more than 10 years or so. In the late 1930s and during and after the second world war, industrial and residential developments completely obliterated the areas where Dr. Small did most of his studies. Today the area is wall-to-wall buildings, apartments and highways. The only Louisiana irises to be found exist in private gardens and a few public plantings.

We will never know the extent of this natural development. Areas explored and described by Small were not too extensive, probably not more than about 100 square miles between the south shore of Lake Pontchartrain and New Orleans city limits, extending east to the Mississippi River and some distance down river. This was the area of maximum iris development, to which Small applied the term “the iris center of the universe.”

### **Frenchman Street**

Since I was born and raised in New Orleans, I have a few hazy childhood recollections. My grandmother often talked about “Frenchman Street” in an area at that time far remote from the city, mainly swamps devoted to fishing and duck hunting. When I was about five years old in 1925 (and not yet interested in irises) I recall my father “cranking

up” our vintage Studebaker and taking the family on a day-long expedition to Gentilly and Frenchman Street, in the middle of Small’s “iris center of the universe” en route to a picnic on the shore of Lake Pontchartrain. It was necessary to crank-start this car since it did not have an electric starter. The picture of Dr. Small’s “weed wagon” (see page 19 in the Society’s Fiftieth Anniversary Publication) is a later 1920s vintage auto.

My only recollection about Frenchman Street is that it was not a street at all, but a swamp with a expansion and barely-passable dirt road along side. There was much refuse and trash, which affirms what Small had to say about Frenchman Street (see page 37 of Publication). Another “adventure” was my mother seeing several snakes, and she would not let me out of the car even when we had to stop to make tire repairs – and that was not infrequent, snakes or no snakes. This makes me understand why Dr. Small traveled with his personal mechanic. There are other pleasant memories. A favorite pastime of this five year-old was to predict how many flat we would have during the day, much to my father’s frustration. I recall my mother later telling me I predicted two that day. Bingo!

### **Woodward Painting**

Return now to 1993. Late one afternoon a few weeks ago I picked up my wife Helene at New Orleans International. We decided to take a scenic route home, up I-55 along the east shore of Lake Pontchartrain, stopping for supper at Pass Manchac. This is about 40 airline miles from downtown New Orleans and still a rural fishing area. While waiting to be served, a picture on the wall caught my eye. It was a print of “Wild Irises” by Ellsworth Woodward, painted in 1908 and depicting the Frenchman Street iris fields at least 20 years before Dr. Small

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*“Wild Irises”, by Ellsworth Woodward, is reproduced with the permission of the New Orleans Museum of Art: Bequest of Miss Lena*



## Dr. John K. Small

**A**lthough the first species of Louisiana iris, *I. hexagona*, was named in 1788, followed by the naming of the species *I. fulva* and *I. brevicaulis* a few decades thereafter, nothing significant in the way of formal recognition occurred until more than a century later.

In 1925 Dr. John K. Small, botanist, plant explorer and curator of The New York Botanical Garden, became acquainted with the vast colonies of native irises in south Louisiana. Small had been doing plant explorations east of the Mississippi, into the southeast and particularly in Florida as far back as the

early 1900s. It was in Florida that he first saw “vast fields of irises covering many acres.” The story is told how Dr. Small was traveling on a train from Florida to west Texas, across Louisiana, when he first caught a glimpse of the extensive iris fields from the train window. This probably occurred near New Orleans. He realized that these south Louisiana fields probably rivaled if not exceeded what he had seen in Florida. The net result was that he explored these areas annually for the next six or seven years. Small documented his plant explorations in more than sixty articles in the *Journal of The New*

*York Botanical Garden*.

Most of the areas explored by Small in Louisiana, by his own descriptions, were in and around New Orleans. In the 1920s the area extending from city limits towards the north and east to Lake Pontchartrain was largely undeveloped, low, swampy and wild. This was the area where the trains passed to enter the city, and most likely where Small first saw the irises in Louisiana.

From “Introduction”,  
SLI 25th Anniversary Publication,  
1991.



saw them. This activity of Woodward (art professor at Newcomb College, now Tulane University) in taking his students to paint the wild irises is a part of Louisiana iris lore. A part of this picture is reproduced on the cover of Louisiana Iris Cultivars (1982 edition). The painting is far more impressive and depicts literally hundreds of acres of iris fields. This may be the only pictorial account and is reported to be in the collection of the New Orleans Museum of Art. Other Woodward paintings are reported to be in private collections.

### Progress

of Frenchman Street. About 1940, the irises having departed for “iris heaven,” a huge industrial plant was constructed in the general area to build airplane components and tanks for the war effort. It was called the “Michoud” plant, named after an old plantation. After the war the plant became idle. When President Kennedy announced manned missions to the moon, the Michoud plant was chosen to build the huge first stage of the Saturn rocket, the so-called “moon rocket,” one for every mission.

The moon missions were resounding successes, and none would have

been possible without the production of the Michoud plant. The story goes on. After the moon missions were finished in the early 1970s the plant was converted to produce the huge external fuel tanks for the space shuttle. These are the enormous, bullet-shaped tanks to which the shuttle is attached. Ironically, these tanks are painted rust-red, almost identical to the color of *I. fulva*, once known to have grown in the general area. The Michoud plant has produced one of these tanks for every shuttle mission and continues to do so. Plans exist that Michoud will produce parts of the

space station, if and when that becomes a reality.

There are many interesting facets to this story. Louisiana irises are not to be found in the vicinity of the Michoud plant or anywhere close to it. The irises have been pushed south and east, across the Mississippi River and several miles beyond the towns of Houma and Thibodaux to within a short distance from the Gulf of Mexico. Here the iris remnants of Frenchman Street continue to lead a precarious existence in the wild. This is all that remains of “the iris center of the universe.”

All is not lost! We cannot expect,

nor should we, to hold back progress and science. I could write a volume, possibly volumes, about the benefits to humankind resulting from “scientific fallout” from the space program. There is hardly a person whose life has not been touched for the better. Loss of the irises of Frenchman Street, or the spotted owl, etc., may be a small price to pay. Things can be done about augmenting such losses. The irises have not really been lost; their genes continue to exist in the modern Louisiana hybrids. We can do much more than has already been done to promote growing our irises all over the world. This is a fitting tribute,

and what a better place to start than in south Louisiana, near to where the “iris center of the universe” once was.

New Orleans is by no means the only example of devastation of wild populations. There are countless others, particularly the areas around Lafayette. And there are other major causes in addition to urban growth. These include (1) drainage of swamps and wet areas, and (2) coastal erosion and intrusion of

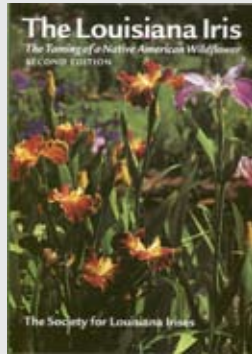


*I. brevicaulis*

## SLI Commercial Directory

<p><b>Albert C. Faggard</b> 3840 LeBleu Street Beaumont, TX 77707 (409) 835-4322 Catalog \$1</p>	<p><b>Bay View Gardens</b> 1201 Bay Street Santa Cruz, CA 95060 <i>Introductions of Mary Dunn</i> Catalog \$1.50</p>	<p><b>Bois d’Arc Gardens</b> 1831 Bull Run Road Schriever, LA 70395 (504) 446-2329 Catalog \$1</p>
<p><b>Comanche Acres Iris Garden</b> Rt. 1, Box 258 Gower, MO 64454 <i>Introductions of Henry Rowlan</i> Free brochure upon request</p>	<p><b>Deep South Gardens</b> <i>Introductions of Dorman Haymon</i> 218 Duhon Road Duson, Louisiana 70529</p>	<p><b>Iris City Gardens</b> 7675 Younger Creek Road Primm Springs, TN 38476 Wholesale and Retail Call (800) 934-IRIS (4747) for Free color catalog</p>
<p><b>Isle of View Iris Garden</b> P. O. Box 3126 Battle Ground, WA 98604 (360) 687-1567 isle@nwlinc.com Write or email for free spring catalog <i>Louisiana Bearded Siberian</i></p>	<p><b>Louisiana Iris Farms</b> 321 W. Main St., Suite 2D Lafayette, LA 70501 (318) 232-6096</p>	<p><b>Louisiana Nursery</b> 5853 Highway 182 Opelousas, LA 70570 (337) 948-3696 www.louisiananursery.org Wholesale &amp; Retail - Color catalog \$4</p>
<p><b>Pine Ridge Gardens</b> 832L Sycamore Rd. London, AR 72847 Catalog \$1 (deductible)</p>	<p><b>Quail Hill Gardens</b> 2460 Compton Bridge Road Inman, SC 29349</p>	<p><b>Redbud Lane Iris Garden</b> 2282 N. 350th St. Kansas, IL 61933 (217) 948-5478 Catalog \$1</p>
<p><b>Seabrook Nursery</b> 9924 N. W. 171 Terrace Alachua, FL 32615 (904) 462-7999 Color catalog \$1</p>	<p><b>Where to buy Louisiana Irises!</b></p>	<p>This Commercial Directory appears quarterly <i>Newsletter</i> of the Society for Louisiana Irises.</p>

# *It's a deal!*



*The second edition of The Louisiana Iris may be ordered directly from the Society for Louisiana Irises at a discounted price. For each copy to be mailed, send \$30 (\$25 for the book, \$5 for postage) to: **Elaine Larcade-Bourque, 514 Garenne Rd., Lafayette, LA 70508***

## *Bayou and Marsh*

NEWSLETTER OF THE  
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# GNO



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