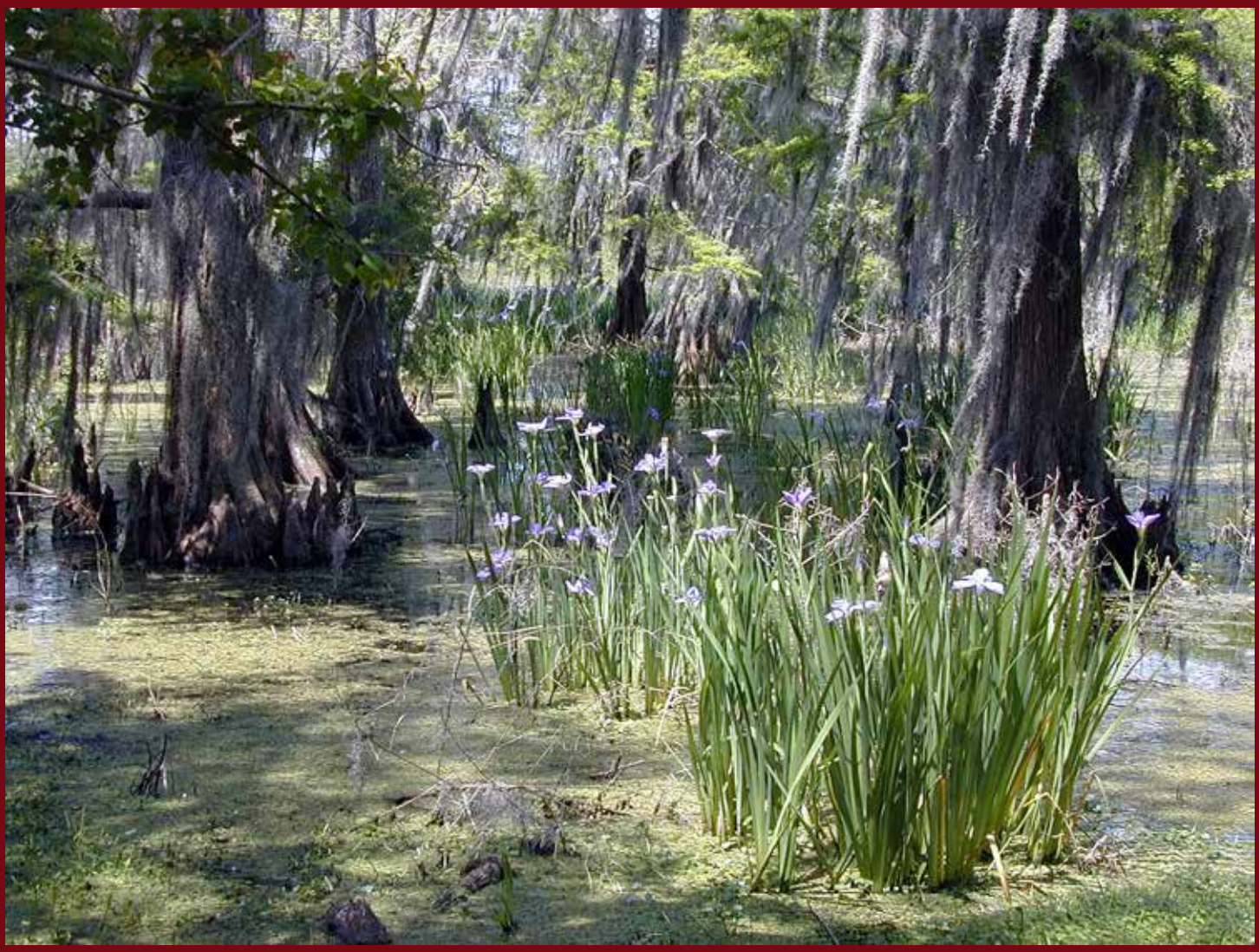
A GUIDE TO LOUISIANA IRISES

IN AND AROUND NEW ORLEANS



GREATER NEW ORLEANS IRIS SOCIETY

3rd Edition, 2018

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

GNOIS is grateful for the financial support of the **Master Gardeners of Greater New Orleans** in producing this third edition of the *Guide To Louisiana Irises In And Around New Orleans*. MGGNO also supported the second edition.

The leadership of GNOIS President Eileen Hollander and the support of several individuals is gratefully acknowledged. Linda Trahan contributed immeasurably in editorial advice and assistance. Paul Pastorek prepared the concise sidebar on the causes of iris habitat destruction. Members of the GNOIS Board reviewed drafts.

The front cover picture was taken in the Town of Jean Lafitte by Patrick O'Connor, who also edited the document and who is responsible for any remaining errors.

INTRODUCTION

In 2018, New Orleans marks its 300th year. After three centuries, there is much in the City's glorious history to celebrate, but also some changes to lament.

Over the years, the land that now comprises New Orleans has been transformed virtually beyond recognition. Urban development, industrialization, major public works projects (such as for levees, transportation, commerce, and parks) – not to mention some pretty bad weather – have all contributed significantly to the obliteration of the 1718 landscape of New Orleans.

"View of the Swamps", a photograph by Theodore Lilienthal, from Jewell and Prescott, ***Crescent City Illustrated,*** *1872. Original in Hill Memorial Library Special Collections, Louisiana State University.*

Among the missing today are the massive fields of native irises that once filled much of the City. Many of these irises and their habitats survived into the 19th and even the 20th centuries. "View of the Swamps," a photograph reproduced in Gary A. Van Zante's *New Orleans 1867: Photographs by Theodore Lilienthal,* is the only known image that documents the masses of Louisiana irises in the City prior to the early 1900s. The image reveals what may be marsh or cut-over swamp that displays the irises in the dense clumps that characterize the species *I. giganticaerulea* when growing in water and full sun.

I. fulva *depicted near the time of its designation as a species.* ***Curtis Botanical Magazine****, London, 1812.*

We don't know where Lilienthal took this historic photograph, but today the spot undoubtedly is crisscrossed by roads and densely dotted with buildings and parking lots. The same is true of the site on Frenchmen Street where Newcomb College professor and artist Ellsworth Woodward painted a field of *I. giganticaerulea* – now the State Wildflower – in 1908. Woodward reportedly liked to take students out toward the Lake to paint the irises. In 1931, Dr. John K. Small observed, "The marsh along which and through which Frenchmen Street was built was a celebrated iris field, for many years a favorite place for the citizens interested in iris to observe and gather specimens or bouquets. Manufacturing plants finally began to use the marsh as a dumping ground for refuse, and today most of the former growth has been buried …." The irises are long gone but they had to be inspirational in their day.

Top and right, paintings of irises by Ellsworth Woodward. At top, "Wild Irises", reproduced with the permission of the New Orleans Museum of Art. Bequest of Miss Lena Little. Left, John James Audubon's 1822 painting of the Parula Warbler posed on a "Louisiana flag", ***I. fulva****.*

A second Louisiana iris species found in New Orleans, *I. fulva*, is dramatically different. *Fulva's* red color was unique among the world's several hundred iris species when it was named by John Ker Gawler in 1812. *Fulva* is found far beyond New Orleans, but it has a special connection with the City. According to *Curtis Botanical Magazine* in London in that same year, the specific plant that was the basis for the species

name was "found spontaneous on the Banks of Mississippi, in low grounds not far from the town of New-Orleans." Named in England, but collected in New Orleans.

While the pure forms of the red *I. fulva* and the blue-purple *I. giganticaerulea* were plentiful around New Orleans, each species varies in shade and even color. Yellow *fulvas* and white *giganticaeruleas* occur, although rarely. *I. fulva* can be red-red, brick-red or orange, sometimes supporting the common name of "copper iris."

Dr. John K. Small and associates with the "Weed Wagon" used in collecting expeditions in Louisiana and Florida. Source: State Archives of Florida, Florida Memory.

The proximity of the two species and their variants – genetically related but so wildly different in color and form – resulted in many natural hybrids that contrasted strikingly with their progenitors. It was not uncommon to find colors not really associated with any of the parent species, and the prospect of discovering a "new" iris turned some local people into collectors and explorers. Mary Nelson wrote of her memories of collecting irises with her sister Ethel Hutson in early 1900s New Orleans:

> "As a child I used to go on my uncle's back looking for irises, and was never ready to go home until I found a yellow one" .... "until very recent years we gathered many shades of blue ones from the dump on Broad street and the new basin canal, but old Bayou Sauvage which runs along Gentilly highway was our favorite place, for all the colors grew there."

Discovery

Although a few individuals in New Orleans and Louisiana more broadly had taken note of the wild irises – and botanists had documented and assigned species names to several – they were not a plant introduced into horticulture. As late as the 1920s and 1930s, Louisiana irises were simply unknown to the general public and inaccessible to the gardening community.

It took a nationally prominent taxonomic botanist and the author of *The Flora of the Southeastern United States* to transform the awareness of these plants. As the story goes, in 1925 Dr. John K. Small, Head Curator of the New York Botanical Garden, was traveling by train from Florida (where he worked with related native irises and many other plants) when he saw fields of irises as he passed through New Orleans. The train would have gone through what today is New Orleans East, at the time a largely undeveloped, low, swampy area and a prime habitat for *I. giganticaerulea* and possibly other species and natural hybrids.

Excited by his "discovery", Small returned every year through 1931 or 1932 to explore, study the irises, and collect samples. He connected with local people who knew the area, and he explored not just in the City but also a wider area around it. While the exact locations are not certain, we do know that he went down the Mississippi delta on both sides of the River and at least as far as Houma and Thibodaux to the southwest.

Dr. Small reshaped the horticultural landscape in several consequential ways. First, as he explored and found irises significantly different in color and form, he began to assign new species names. The exact number is not known. Different sources say from 75 to nearly 90, but Small himself is quoted in the *Times-Picayune* in a 1932 talk to the Louisiana Iris Conservation Society that there were "more than 100 species of iris represented by 300 color varieties … in and near New Orleans." This was a startling – and exciting – statement, com-

*Watercolors of Louisiana irises by Mary E. Eaton, published in Addisonia, 1932. From left, "I. chrysophoenicia", "I. atrocyanea", "I. vinicolor", "I. miraculosa", and **I. giganticaerulea**. Only the designation of **giganticaerulea** is recognized today. "I. vinicolor" was shown to be a first generation hybrid between **I. fulva** and **I. giganticaerulea**, and it has become a passalong plant sometimes seen in New Orleans gardens.*

ing from such an authority as Dr. Small. By today's count, one hundred would increase the number of recognized species of ***Iris*** in North America by a factor of five and would expand the worldwide species count by around a third. It was hyperbole consistent with Small's enthusiasm when he declared that the New Orleans area was "the iris center of the universe."

To publicize the irises to the horticultural public, Small wrote journal articles in publications of the New York Botanical Garden and, most significantly, from 1925-1929, published full color plates and descriptions of the irises in *Addisonia*, one of the Botanical Garden publications. The Society for Louisiana Irises observed that this "was at a time when color photography was in its infancy, color films did not exist and color printing was just beginning to emerge." The color plates, based upon watercolor paintings by Mary E. Eaton, were a sensation and are credited with a surge of interest in Louisiana irises.

In 1935, Percy Viosca, Jr., a native of New Orleans and a longtime student of the flora of South Louisiana, published his paper "The Irises of Southeastern Louisiana: A Taxonomic and Ecological Interpretation." Based on detailed analysis and in-depth knowledge of South Louisiana, Viosca concluded there were only *three* distinct iris species in the Louisiana iris group in the area. Viosca's view was that the "large majority of the forms described from the same region by Small … and innumerable others yet undescribed, [should be interpreted] in part as variants and in part as natural hybrids." This is the view that prevails today. There is evidence that even Small realized some of the "species" he named would be found to actually be natural hybrids.

Endangered But Not Doomed

Dr. Small's sorting of native irises into species buckets proved flawed, but his contribution to the awareness and appreciation of the irises and the range of their variation remains unchallenged. Further, he delivered prescient warnings that the habitat of the irises was seriously endangered. Both "Vanishing Irises" and "Salvaging the Native American Irises" were published by Small in 1931 in the *Journal of the New York Botanical Garden*. Small detailed the destruction of iris habitat and announced an overarching observation: "After a thorough survey of the iris lands in the New Orleans region, we confidently calculate that through rural improvements and urban growth about eighty percent of the iris fields of half century ago have been ravaged or destroyed!"

More hyperbole perhaps, but entirely plausible based on contemporaneous observation. In a letter, George Thomas, Superintendent of Parks in New Orleans, offered Dr. Small a verifiable assessment at the time:

> *"During the past twenty-five years, I have witnessed the most frightful destruction amongst the irises within the city limits of New Orleans and adjoining parishes, even worse than that of the Frenchmen Street Location. At the junction of Washington and Carrollton Avenues, there was a patch of several acres, which when in bloom appeared to be a solid mass of iris; today not one remains. At the site of Newcomb College there was a fine stand of Iris fulva. This has disappeared entirely. Suburban Acres on the way to Kenner at one time was a fine hunting ground for the vinicolor types, but very few can be found there now, and the natural growth of the city, with its paved streets and subsurface drainage replacing mud streets with open ditches, of necessity destroys many fine colonies of various colors."*

All is not doom and gloom for Louisiana irises, even though the days are gone when a John K. Small and a Percy Viosca could join forces as they did in 1932 to "comb the city" in search of irises for a beautification project in City Park. In fact, wild irises still grow on the outskirts of New Orleans, and they can be seen if you drive down to Jean Lafitte, up to LaPlace, or southwest toward Houma.

Even more significantly, wild Louisiana irises are not native to the New Orleans area alone – in fact, far from it. Dr. Small entirely missed seeing the iris fields in Southwest Louisiana. He did not know about the unique, tall red irises in a small swamp near Abbeville, a truly endangered plant which, since Small's day, has been designated as a separate species, *I. nelsonii*. In addition, Small's writing did not deal with the extensive habitat of *I. fulva* and *I. brevicaulis*, which extends far north up into the Mississippi Valley as well as in many places across Louisiana he did not explore.

There is much about Louisiana irises to celebrate, enjoy, and understand today. The irises have returned to New Orleans to reclaim a piece of their natural heritage. The remainder of this booklet will address three broad topics.

- **Natural History.** The natural history and characteristics of the currently recognized *five* species of Louisiana irises will be discussed. This includes the East Coast species, *I. hexagona*. Where are they native, what are the conditions and locations in which they occur, and what is their status with respect to survival? The niche of each species is somewhat different, and so too are the threats to its existence.
- **Locations.** The places where Louisiana irises can be seen will be highlighted, including not only the species but the modern Louisiana hybrids growing in popularity today. There is no need to venture into a swamp. There are some stunning plantings of both species and hybrids that are easily accessible to all. The genes of the wild irises have been called upon to create stunning modern hybrids for us all to enjoy.
- **Preservation and Restoration.** An overview will be presented of steps being taken both to preserve the natural forms of Louisiana irises and to restore them when feasible to the natural settings from which they may have been driven by reversible natural and man-made processes. An exciting and unprecedented Louisiana Iris Species Preservation Project will be described that is expected to pay dividends in iris conservation in the years to come.

THE SPECIES OF LOUISIANA IRISES

Richard Drouant

Iris giganticaerulea

Iris giganticaerulea is the "Giant Blue" of South Louisiana swamps and freshwater marshes. It also occurs into coastal Texas and Mississippi, although it is heavily concentrated in Louisiana.

- **How tall is it?** In a swamp habitat, *giganticaeruleas* can grow to five feet or even more, although four feet is common. In a garden setting, 37 to 46 inches is average.
- **Color.** *I. giganticaerulea* is typically blue, blue-purple, or blue-lavender. A range of shades from darker to light is found, and pure white forms occur occasionally.
- **Flower size.** Flowers range from 5 to 6 inches across. The standards are held upright.
- **Big rhizomes.** In its native swamp setting, it is not uncommon to find rhizomes a foot or more in length, but 7 to 10 inches is more typical in cultivation. In a garden, and given vegetative offsets in each direction, this size rhizome can result in large, expanding clumps.
- **Stalk.** The flower stalk, or scape, is very straight with little curve. Each stalk bears two flowers at the top position and one at each of the 4-5 leaf bracts.

Richard Drouant

Richard Drouant

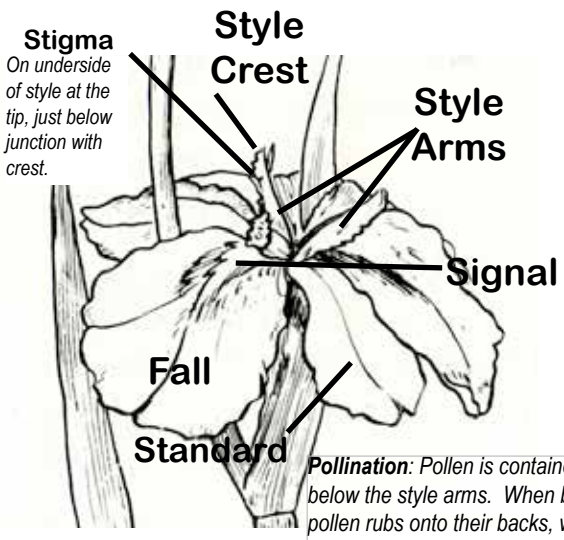
*Places still exist to see **I. giganticaerulea** in masses, but those are fewer than in the past. Hurricanes have damaged the irises at the Jean Lafitte Historical Park Barataria Preserve, but they are coming back. Unfortunately, roadside sightings are less common today. Because this iris prefers the wettest conditions of all the Louisianas, certain swamp tours are a good option.*

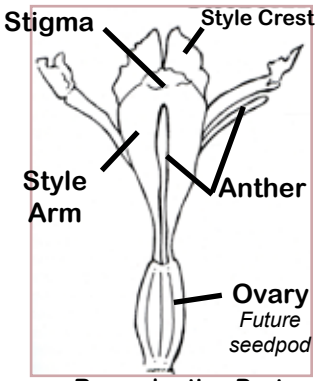
Iris giganticaerulea

- **Bloom season.** *Giganticaeruleas* are early bloomers, usually appearing in mid to late March.
- **Likes sun and water.** This iris likes the wettest conditions among all the species. It is commonly found in standing water year round. In open freshwater marshes, it enjoys full sun. In a swamp setting, it is usually occurs at the sunny edges and disappears in shady spots.
- **Survival.** *Giganticaerulea* survives in areas where its habitat has not been destroyed by development, agriculture, or saltwater intrusion. Many such habitats are inaccessible and difficult to develop, which is favorable to the iris's prospects.

Ginger Rushing

The Structure Of An Iris Flower





Reproductive Parts
View of underside of style arms

***Pollination**: Pollen is contained on the underside of the anthers, appendages below the style arms. When bees crawl under the styles seeking nectar, pollen rubs onto their backs, which (when the bee visits a different flower) is deposited on the stigma, sticky flaps connected to the ovary by a tube through the style (not visible). Hummingbirds sometimes pollinate irises, also.*

What Destroys Our Wild Irises?

By the time Dr. J. K. Small "discovered" the irises on his train ride through New Orleans in the early 1920s, urbanization and industrialization were destroying God's iris gardens. Today, the fields of irises Dr. Small saw in Southeast Louisiana have been decimated. Mere remnants remain.

There are several past and present reasons for iris decimation:

1. **Urban sprawl**. As cities grew throughout South Louisiana, low-lying marshlands were filled in to create more human habitat. Wetlands protection laws passed since 1972 have significantly restricted this practice.
2. **Farming sprawl and operations.** As farms edge up to wetlands, farmers have sometimes filled them in to gain agricultural space. Although now restricted by law, drainage patterns are still altered to protect crops. Overspray and/or runoff from fertilizers, pesticides, and herbicides can leak into the wetlands.
3. **Drainage.** Louisiana's wetlands create the risk of flooding human habitat. Flood management practices – including levees, canals, dams, and water control structures – radically alter water levels in indigenous iris habitat. Oil field canals and new oil and gas pipelines crisscross marshes and swamps, destroying precious iris wetland habitat.
4. **Hurricanes.** Storms bring in salt water which kills irises, facilitated by the digging of canals.

Other factors include illegal dumping of waste and refuse into wetlands and herbicide use along roadsides. Over-collection of irises may occasionally occur. Particularly alarming, global water level rise is likely to be an increasing problem in the destruction of habitat.

Wild irises are not in control of their destiny. Hopefully, we will become as mindful as the indigenous people and allow irises to live peaceably in the remnant wetlands.

Iris fulva

A. J. Adams

Iris fulva is the famous red iris that excited the horticultural world when it was named in the early 1800s. No other iris was found in nature that was red, and only the Louisiana iris group can claim this trait. In other classifications of *Iris*, red has been developed through hybridizing, but the natural red genes in Louisianas (from *I. fulva* and *I. nelsonii*) have resulted in exceptionally vivid red cultivars.

- **Color.** *Fulva* is found in many shades of red. Often it is a rust red or orangish red. Some even call it brown. Yellow occurs but is rare. Sometimes yellows are a butterscotch color and sometimes a pure mid-yellow.
- **Flower**. The bloom on *fulva* is typically smaller than the other Louisiana irises and tends to droop. Four inches across is average. Sometimes the flower flares gracefully. Its vivid color is always striking to see in the landscape, particularly in numbers such as along a roadside in full sun.
- **Height**. Bloom stalks, or scapes, range from 20 to 35 inches tall and curve slightly. Often the scape will have side branches at the leaf bracts with additional blooms held a bit away from the main stalk.
- **Bloom season**. *Fulva* bloom begins in late March, a bit after *giganticaerulea,* and continues into mid-April or sometimes a little later.
- **Where found**. I. f*ulva* is a plant of delta soils, land built up by the overflow of rivers, bayous, and streams. It is found along waterways, in ditches, and in wet areas along roadsides. *Fulva* can be in full sun or partial shade. Unlike *giganticaerulea* or *nelsonii,* it is not found in open marshes or in swamps.
- **Survival**. *I. fulva* remains reasonably plentiful. Roadsides and ditches actually create a habitat hospitable to *fulva*. On the other hand, these settings are readily subject to human activity, which sometimes results in destruction of the irises.

Louisiana cannot claim *I. fulva* exclusively as its own. It is found far up the Mississippi River Valley into Southern Illinois. The counties in which it has been reported tend to hug the Mississippi River, particularly the west side in delta lands (see page 14). In Louisiana, *fulva* habitat also occurs in the Atchafalaya Basin and in the delta of the Red River from Caddo Parish to the point at which it flows into the Atchafalaya near the Mississippi north of New Roads.

Linda Trahan

Iris fulva

Iris fulva *is both the beneficiary and the victim of development. The roadside ditches outside urban areas have created new habitats that welcome this iris, but occasional grading and herbicide spraying often destroys irises that otherwise would thrive there.*

Benny Trahan

Iris Taxonomy: Where Do The Irises We See Fit In?

With over 250 iris species distributed across the Northern Hemisphere, the genus *Iris* is extensive and complex, the largest member of the family *Iridaceae*. Irises are but one genus in the larger family, but, unfortunately, only a relatively small number of the member iris species will tolerate growing conditions in the Gulf South.

The family *Iridaceae* contains some familiar plants that are iris "cousins" but not irises per se; that is, while in the family *Iridaceae*, they are not in the genus *Iris*. The so-called butterfly irises (*Dietes*) and walking irises (*Neomarica*) are examples of family members of other genera that hail from the Southern Hemisphere. These plants exhibit the familiar iris flower form, but differ in other ways. Although they are not true irises, just iris wannabes, they are nice garden plants for the Gulf South.

True members of the genus *Iris* itself are complex enough. To differentiate key characteristics, the genus is divided into subgenera, sections, and series. For example, the subgenus *Iris* (confusingly with the same name as the genus) consists of the bearded irises, and the subgenus *Limniris* consists of "beardless" irises. Louisianas are among the beardless irises, and the five Louisiana species comprise a series within *Limniris* called *Hexagonae*. Other series are devoted to Japanese, Siberian, Spuria, and Pacific Coast irises, among others.

*The delicate **I. japonica**, above, easily confused with **I. confusa**, both crested irises.*

The beardless irises also include the series *Laevigatae*, one member of which is the infamous yellow flag, *I. pseudacorus,* an iris found wild from Western Europe to Western Siberia, Iran, Turkey, and North Africa. It is a common import to Louisiana and across the U.S. Landscapers love it for its good foliage. Unfortunately, *pseudacorus* will take over a bed and, worse, displace native irises when it escapes into a wetland. In some states, it is illegal to import this iris.

Ironically, the native *I. virginica* is a member of the same series, *Laevigatae*. *Virginica* is a civilized and attractive plant, however, not a garden thug.

Dutch irises are another familiar and benign group. They are classified in a different subgenus altogether, *Xiphium*, and grow from bulbs, not rhizomes such as Louisiana irises and all the others in the subgenus *Limniris*.

All Louisiana gardeners should be aware of the crested irises (also beardless, section *Lophiris)*, which grow from slender stolons rather than rhizomes. Their very narrow stalks bear beautiful little flowers on slender, branched stems. Two nearly indistinguishable species, *I. japonica* and *I. confusa*, grow well in shade, tolerate South Louisiana conditions, and make beautiful additions to the garden.

Robert Treadway

Walter Moores' beautiful bearded iris 'Valentine Romance' with deep orange beards. Unfortunately, these irises do not grow well in the Gulf South.

Iris brevicaulis

Iris brevicaulis is the dwarf of Louisiana iris species, at least by comparison, and for this reason the least popular as a garden plant. Although short, the flower is pretty and charming, and the species has been exceedingly important to the development of hybrids. A late bloomer, starting in mid April, this iris extends the season.

- **Color.** *I. brevicaulis* is a blue and blue-purple species with a color range similar to *giganticaerulea*. Occasionally, there is a hint of violet. Pure white is found, but it is extremely rare.
- **Flower.** *Brevicaulis* flowers are about 4 inches wide. The iris often shows considerable variability in its signals, the usually distinct area on the falls beneath the style arms where a bee lands looking for nectar. The signals can be a large thumbprint decorated with veining or something less showy.
- **Height.** *Brevicaulis* typically grows to no more than around 20 inches tall. It often leans rather than having upright bloom stalks. The foliage tends to bend over at the tips, as seen at the lower left. The stalk forms a pronounced zigzag shape.
- **Where found.** *Brevicaulis* is found in wet spots, but not where water stands for much of the time. It occurs along sloughs and places where the soil is mucky. The iris can form extensive colonies under the right conditions, almost like a ground cover. The geographic range is similar to *fulva* in that it grows far into the north, even into southern Ontario. Along with *fulva*, *brevicaulis* contributes cold hardiness to today's hybrids. An extensive range promotes survival of the species, but brevicaulis is found on land that is not difficult to develop. Consequently, its habitat is often destroyed.

Robert Turley

M. J. Unist

*The short stalk of **I. brevicaulis** results in flowers that bloom down in the foliage, a bad feature in an ornamental plant. The zigzag stalk is a very good attribute, however, and it has been transmitted to many cultivars.*

Iris nelsonii

Jim Murrain

Iris nelsonii is a unique and endangered plant. It occurs only in a swamp southeast of Abbeville where it appears to have evolved from hybrid origins to a stable species that reproduces true from seed.

- **Color.** The color range of *nelsonii* is similar to *fulva*: mainly red shades with rare yellows. Generally, the flowers of *nelsonii* bloom closer to true red than *fulva*, which more often is brick red. A range of shades is found, however.
- **Height.** *Nelsonii* may be red like *fulva* but it is almost as tall as *giganticaerulea*. In its Abbeville swamp habitat, bloom stalks of four feet or taller are found. In a garden setting, *nelsonii* will be shorter but might grow to 32 or 40 inches, still significantly taller than *fulva*.
- **Flower**. *Nelsonii* shares *fulva's* tendency for its petals to droop. The shape is sometimes called "pendant", with falls and even standards that hang or flare downward. The relatively large size of the flowers – four to five inches across – result in a showy bloom.
- **Stalk.** The bloom stalk of *nelsonii* is slightly curved. Like *fulva*, it falls between the straight stalk of *giganticaerulea* and the zigzag stem of *brevicaulis*.
- **Sun Exposure.** *Nelsonii* occurs naturally in mainly shady locations beneath the Abbeville swamp canopy. Since the cypress-tupelo swamp is deciduous, the irises receive winter sunlight. In contrast, *giganticaerulea* is happy in full sun in open marsh, disappearing in the shadiest swamp sites. *Fulva* also thrives in full sun or in light shade.
- **Bloom Season.** *I. nelsonii* begins blooming in very late March to early April in its swamp home. *Giganticaerulea* tends to begin bloom a bit earlier and *brevicaulis,* much later.

I. nelsonii is an important as well as beautiful iris. Its contribution to the development of modern Louisiana iris hybrids has been very significant, but the principal issue today is *nelsonii's* continued survival in the habitat in which it developed. Paul Pastorek explores the status of *nelsonii* in its Abbeville home in the following article.

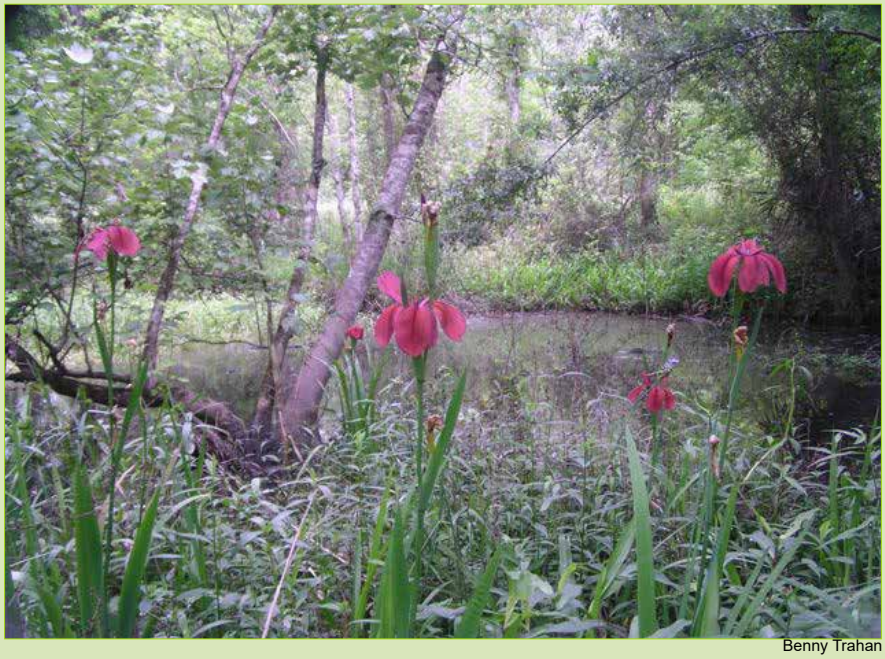
I. nelsonii *is similar in color range to* ***I. fulva****, but it is always possible to distinguish the two by flower size and by the distinctive way that the style of* ***nelsonii*** *forms a tube around the anther, as shown in the picture at the top.*

THE ABBEVILLE SWAMP

By Paul Pastorek

In one small Louisiana swamp, and only in this swamp, lives a rare and endangered species of Louisiana iris, *Iris nelsonii*, hanging by a thread.

This threatened iris was "discovered" in 1938 in the Abbeville Swamp by "a rice man by vocation, a lover of nature, and an inveterate gardener," William Buchanan MacMillan. While others before him surely noticed its stunning red display in the spring, MacMillan was the first to recognize that it is clearly different from any other wild iris.



Benny Trahan

In these patchy wetlands, less than three square miles, MacMillan saw "literally fields of red iris interspersed with yellows that (he) had stumbled upon" in a part of the Abbeville Swamp known as Steen's Woods. He called them the "Abbeville Reds." MacMillan later reflected, "This discovery of mine was somewhat like…the early English explorers who found fabulous fields of diamonds that the Boers of the South African Transvaal had stubbed their toes upon for centuries without ever realizing their value. It was thus that 'Abbeville Reds' became news and the news begot interest from far and wide—interest that assembled car pools of iris hunters in a way reminiscent of the early California Gold Rush Days…"

Native Louisiana iris species are by their nature usually situated in wet environments: some in impounded water in sandy soils above mean sea level; some on the banks and edges of natural waterways; some in marshes, which are grassy plains at the margins of sea level and are constantly inundated with fresh or brackish water; and, some, like the Abbeville Reds, in swamps, which are wetlands that also support trees and woody plants.

This swamp was created by an old river and its distributaries that ran east to west and emptied into the eastern side of what we call the Vermilion River. The muddy river bed that remained when the old river diverted became the Abbeville Swamp. In MacMillan's days, one of the main distributaries of this ancient river was called Young's Coulee, which traverses the northern part of the swamp. The word *coulee* comes from the Canadian French *coulée*, from the French word *couler* meaning "to flow". Within Young's Coulee, there were two areas where Abbeville Reds were known to be in abundance: the northwestern part of Young's Coulee and to the east, Steen's Woods. Another spot was Buteaud's Woods, an area south of the Coulee.

As is common in many swamps in South Louisiana, the Abbeville Swamp is host to the bald cypress (*Taxodium distichum)* and tupelo gum (*Nyssa aquatica*). These deciduous trees provide a densely leafy shade in the summer and fall but offer a lightly shaded environment in the winter and spring when the irises are actively growing and preparing for flowering, usually in early April.

In the heyday of hunting for the Abbeville Reds in the late 1930s and 1940s, the swamp floor was often inundated. During the spring blooming season, the iris enthusiasts looking for Abbeville Reds and other color variants reportedly encountered two to four feet of water as they tromped through the swamp.

Scientists studying the Abbeville Reds determined that the flowers were the result of cross pollination among three Louisiana wild iris species: *Iris fulva*, *Iris foliosa* (now called *Iris brevicaulis*) and *Iris hexagona* (*giganticaerulea* in Louisiana). Percy Viosca, a biologist, undertook a study of the locations of wild iris in the early 1930s. His assessment revealed there were areas near the perimeter of the Abbeville Swamp where three different wild irises were found. These locations were of sufficient proximity to suspect that there could be three-way cross pollination. Viosca and botanist Ira Nelson both noticed that characteristics of the Abbeville Reds were similar in many ways to these three irises; however, they also noted characteristics differing from them all. But, it was particularly intriguing to Viosca and Nelson that none of the contributing species were found in the swamp. They believed that was because the swamp was inhospitable to them – due largely to the combination of two factors: the deciduous but largely shady forest and the high water inundation of the swamp. This phenomenon resembles the classic example of the Darwinian finch that lives in isolation and becomes genetically suited to a climate that related species can either not tolerate and/or access. In fact, the Abbeville Reds were determined in 1966 to be a species separate from, but a hybrid of, the three proximate species. Nelson had died by this time, and his colleagues in homage named the iris after him.

These modern scientists realized that the Abbeville Swamp was the crucible that created the species, *I. nelsonii*. However, the swamp is at high risk of dying – and with it, the unique species it spawned. State officials report that the Abbeville Swamp is "a small natural range" and consequently, "the Abbeville Red iris is highly vulnerable." Sadly, the heady days of iris enthusiasts plucking iris out of the Abbeville Swamp are long since over. The fact of the matter is that recent surveys of the swamp show there are no longer "fields of red iris", a predictable result considering man's typical instinct to live at the expense of nature. In fact, this was predicted by Ira Nelson. In a prophetic and fatalistic note, he observed more than 70 years ago that, "The Abbeville Swamp…is rapidly being encroached upon by civilization. It is hoped that before its Iris beds are destroyed, sufficient study of them can be made..."

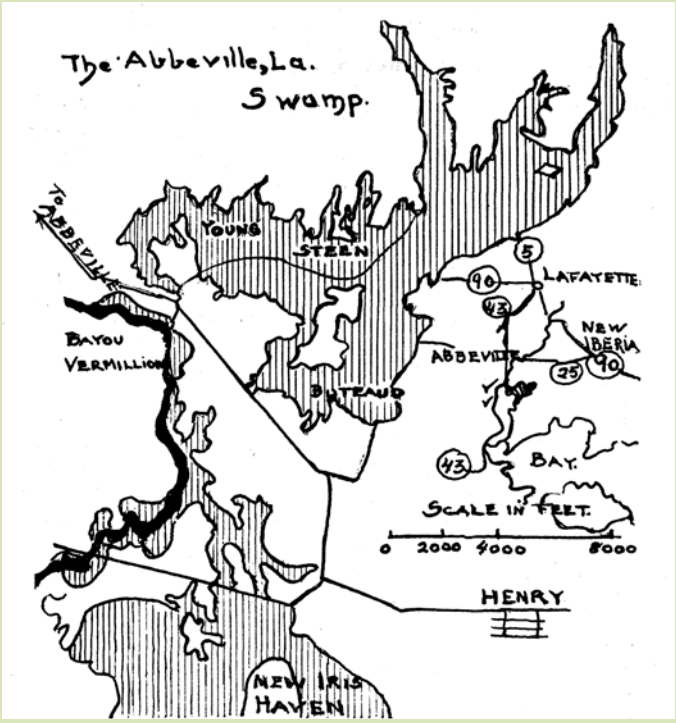
The loss, degradation, or fragmentation of the swamp puts *Iris nelsonii* at risk. Indeed, the Abbeville Swamp is already known to suffer significantly from two human activities: first, continuing encroachment and abuse of the wetlands that make up the swamp, and second, significant drainage of the swamp that has impacted the water levels.

Most of the Abbeville Swamp is owned by private landowners. In fact, almost the entire periphery is comprised of farmlands, although a few tracts are residential properties. Agricultural practices employ herbicides across areas close in proximity to the swamp and, unfortunately, these chemicals are known to have destroyed remaining *Iris nelsonii*. One other farming activity has taken a huge bite out of the prime habitat for Abbeville Reds. In the vicinity of Steen's Woods, the location where MacMillan had first discovered the fields of the Abbeville Reds and Yellows, tons of rice farming waste – rice hulls – have been trucked into the swamp, creating a 25-foot-high mound and covering more than 20 acres of the wetlands. Precious habitat, utterly destroyed.

Adding to the problem, drainage projects have altered the swamp's pre-modern water level. Nearby are oil field canals, diversion projects, levees, and flood control structures. In the swamp itself and sometime between 1940 and 1950, an entirely new canal was dug south of Young's Coulee, increasing the drainage of the swamp and the flow of water out of it. In fact, it is known that the swamp is drier now than in the 1940s. A recent ground survey of the Abbeville Swamp in 2017 during bloom season revealed nearly no standing water on the forest floor, as compared to the 1940s when it was known to be waist deep. It is believed that this change in hydrology may be affecting the extent and abundance of the *Iris nelsonii*. Today, most of the robust stands are found near the edge of the swamp in ditches, possibly because of the deeper water. Regardless, it is clear that the number of irises in the interior are few and far between.

If you are a conservationist, you can appreciate the serious challenges facing the very vulnerable *Iris nelsonii*. Ironically, the very habitat that created this species has been killing it as the iris and the swamp continue to decline, all because of the acts of man.

Most people have a stereotypical view of a swamp. It is a wasteland filled with spiders, snakes, alligators, and God knows what other critters lurking amidst the watery and mucky forest floor. But, having visited the Abbeville Swamp now multiple times, the conjured-up fears quickly fall away when one is in the interior. The mind calms and as one moves through the swamp, and there is a reverie created by the ancient cypress trees and tupelo gum, the trunks of which reach for the sky, forming pillars in this forest cathedral that holds the forest canopy like a roof. It feels like being in a church and seeing God everywhere – in the animals, the trees, the bugs, the water, but especially in the wild, beautiful Abbeville Reds. It is a spiritual experience to be looking at and looking out for this precious and imperiled iris. Though these visits of mine confirm its population is severely depleted, the iris is still struggling to conquer man's combined indifference and deliberately destructive behaviors. We must halt man's damage and work to restore the habitat, lest we lose, among others, its sacred resident.



The Abbeville Swamp as depicted in a map by Ira S. Nelson in 1946 The swamp is less than three miles across and is smaller today due the encroachment of agriculture and other influences. The hydrology has been altered as well.

Iris hexagona

Iris hexagona, the first Louisiana iris to be given a species name (by Thomas Walter in 1788), was based upon a specimen collected in South Carolina, where the species now is extinct or nearly so. As the first named, however, *hexagona* provided the root for taxonomists in formally naming the entire group, the series *Hexagonae*.

I. hexagona is the name most often used today for all the plants in the Louisiana iris series that are found on the East Coast. They are by far most plentiful in Florida where they generally grow under the same conditions as *giganticaerulea* in Louisiana. Their general appearance is of a smaller *giganticaerulea*.

Plant classifications are often rent with controversy, and issues surrounding *I. hexagona* are the principal ones involving Louisiana irises. There are two general questions: one, whether the East Coast irises ought to be subdivided into more than one species, and two, whether plants classified as *I. giganticaerulea* should be considered simply a form of *I. hexagona*. The consensus is that there is but one species on the East Coast, *I. hexagona*, and that *I. giganticaerulea* is sufficiently different to warrant a separate species name. That said, there are those who adopt the contrary positions. Some authorities consider *giganticaerulea* to be a subspecies of *I. hexagona*, and some recognize differences among the East Coast irises and divide them into *I. hexagona* and *I. savannarum.* "Savannarum" was a species name assigned by Small in the 1930s but later abandoned by most authorities.

The characteristics of East Coast Louisiana irises vary, consistent with the observation that they may represent more than one species. It is possible that more northerly examples should be regarded as *I. hexagona* and those in peninsular Florida as *I. savannarum*.

Color. Some *hexagonas* are a deeper blue-purple than most *giganticaeruleas*. White occurs, but rarely. Overall, the color range of the two species is similar.

Flower. Many but not all *hexagonas* hold their standards upright, a trait similar to *giganticaerulea*. Flowers are around five inches wide.

Height. *Hexagonas* from the southern end of their range appear to grow taller, up to four feet. Those in Northern Florida are shorter. The bloom stalk is straight to slightly curved.

Bloom Season. East Coast irises appear to vary widely in bloom season. Some are early but some are very late, possibly associated with the differences between species.

The Louisiana Iris Species Preservation Project

In 2015, the Society for Louisiana Irises created the **Louisiana Iris Species Preservation Project**. Initial work began that year to develop procedures and plans, and in 2016 work started to designate, assemble, and propagate specific, targeted forms of the Louisiana iris species. An evolving Preservation List was created.

The disappearance from the wild of many of the five recognized Louisiana iris species precipitated this effort. When the modern "discovery" and introduction of these plants into horticulture occurred in the 1920s and 1930s, the irises were already endangered.

In Louisiana, one can still see large stands of native irises in freshwater swamps and low wild areas, but the extent of these natural spaces has diminished markedly over the years. And it is not just *numbers* of plants that are threatened. When a population is destroyed, any unique variants that may have developed in the area are also eliminated. The Louisiana Iris Species Preservation Project is focused precisely on the need to preserve the natural range of colors and forms found among the native Louisiana irises.

Two retention ponds containing Louisiana iris species growing in seven gallon pots in the GNOIS planting.

The differences between the species is striking, but the variety ***within*** each species is also remarkable. Saving the range of species forms for posterity requires a systematic, long-term effort. The Species Preservation Project recognizes this requirement. In years past, many specimens have been "rescued" by those attracted to their unique beauty, but "saved" plants sometimes are forgotten and effectively lost as people pass from the scene or interests change. Without systematic and persistent intervention, much of the genetic diversity of Louisiana irises will be lost.

The Species Preservation Project is being implemented in phases, and it will take several years to achieve the full scope envisioned. The approach is to create multiple, permanent collections of representative examples of the colors and forms of each species from throughout its geographic range. The key strategy is to enlist "**Stewards**", individuals who will agree to grow and propagate most or all of the irises on the Preservation List. Stewards must have the space and capacity to grow out a large number of irises, and they must agree to pass along the collection to another Steward should they no longer be able to maintain it. Consistent with the extensive range of Louisiana irises as a group, Stewards are being sought in multiple states. At this time, most are located in Louisiana.

An inventory of the irises and their locations is maintained by Charles Perilloux of Baton Rouge, who proposed the Project and who chairs the SLI Preservation Committee. Stewards are expected to provide an annual report on the plants in their care. Once established and thriving in collections, plants will be made available to individuals and organizations, consistent with adopted guidelines.

The Greater New Orleans Iris Society is taking a lead role in maintaining an initial core collection using space provided by City Park in New Orleans. GNOIS volunteers work regularly to maintain and expand this collection. The GNOIS website displays in one place pictures of many of the irises currently included on the Project's Preservation List. One often hears about the progress made over the years in hybridizing Louisiana irises and about the color breaks that have been achieved. A glance at the assembled pictures of the many species forms is an eye opener. Many of the new colors in hybrids that we have welcomed were initially supplied by Mother Nature. As wildflowers, the Louisiana irises were already a remarkably varied group of plants, and the native forms need to be preserved.

Restoration

The interests of GNOIS members go beyond preservation to include restoration of the irises in the wild where there is a reasonable probability of their long-term survival. Irises from both rescue and propagation efforts have been assembled and are being maintained by the Society in several locations. Relationships with other organizations involved in wetland restoration have been established or are being developed. As opportunities for restoration have arisen or have been instigated, irises have been donated for planting, often with the assistance of GNOIS volunteers. A number of smaller projects are well underway and others will involve a long-term effort.

GNOIS members have the usual interest in horticulture and gardening, but the organization is distinguished by a strong concern for conservation as well. Membership offers opportunities to participate in many types of activities.

Distribution Maps for Louisiana Iris Species

I. brevicaulis

I. fulva

I. giganticaerulea

I. nelsonii

I. hexagona

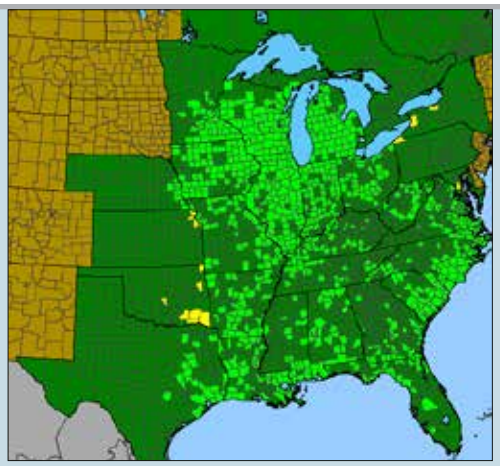
I. savannarum

*SOURCE: Kartesz, J.T., The Biota of North America Program (BONAP). 2018. Taxonomic Data Center. (**http://www.bonap.net/tdc**). Chapel Hill, N.C. [maps generated from Kartesz, J.T. 2018. **Floristic Synthesis of North America**, Version 1.0. Biota of North America Program (BONAP). (in press)]. Note that BONAP, distinguishes the species **I. hexagona** and **I. savannarum**. **Color code: dark green, found in state; light green, widespread in county; yellow, rare in county.***

Iris virginica

Iris virginica is a widespread native iris that grows across the Eastern United States and Canada. It is not a member of the Louisiana group. In Louisiana, it is particularly common on the North Shore, where it is the predominant native iris, but it is found in many other areas as well.

I. virginica is a plant of wet areas similar to the places that Louisiana irises might be found. It usually grows 2 - 3 feet tall and the foliage is marked by a distinct midrib, more similar to *I. pseudacorus* than to a Louisiana iris, which has an entirely flat leaf blade. Actually, *virginica* is closely related to *pseudacorus,* but not as aggressive. *Iris virginica* can be grown in a garden without fear of it taking over.



The color of *virginica* flowers ranges from light blue and blue-lavender to, rarely, white. There are very pretty rose pink forms and dark, near purple ones.

IRISES IN LOUISIANA GARDENS

Longue Vue House and Gardens

Longue Vue House and Gardens consists of an historic, classical revival mansion surrounded by eight acres of beautifully maintained gardens in the Country Place style using the "garden room" concept. Completed in 1942, Longue Vue was built by New Orleans civic activists and philanthropists Edith and Edgar Stern. The gardens were created beginning in 1934 by Ellen Biddle Shipman, the dean of American women landscape architects.

The estate was opened to the public in 1968 and was in continuous operation until Hurricane Katrina flooded the property for two weeks in 2005. Recovery was greatly aided by the Garden Conservancy, which in 2006 designated Longue Vue a Preservation Project. Although the flood waters killed sixty percent of the plant collection, including around two hundred trees and shrubs and ninety percent of the perennials, the garden's integrity was maintained by referring to forty-four Ellen Biddle Shipman drawings. Thanks to the aid of numerous volunteers and generous donations, Longue Vue reopened to the public in July 2006.

Longue Vue can boast the oldest consistently maintained Louisiana iris collection in the area. The irises were first planted in the Wild Garden in 1939 by Caroline Dormon, a prolific writer, artist, botanist, forester, and conservationist. The original irises have largely been replaced by more modern cultivars, but the planting design looks much as it did at the garden's inception.

A long, curving path of nearly one hundred yards is lined on each side with Louisiana irises. They are growing in concrete troughs designed to hold moisture and repel tree roots. The troughs also permitted the flooding of the irises while preserving the habitat of less thirsty plants, such as native azaleas.

The current iris collection consists of examples of all the Louisiana iris species and a group of recent hybrids, many donated by Plantation Point Nursery. There also are unidentified, older cultivars from the Garden's early days. Longue Vue is a great place to see both the irises in their natural state and the changes that have been wrought by over fifty years of hybridizing.

Each year in the spring, Longue Vue holds Louisiana Iris Day, an event in the Wild Garden timed for peak iris bloom. It is a casual and popular occasion, held in late afternoon and early evening, that provides a relaxing visit in one of the most beautiful settings in New Orleans.

Linda Trahan

Longue Vue is located at 7 Bamboo Road in New Orleans. Admission is charged, except to members.

The Sydney and Walda Besthoff Sculpture Garden

In November 2003, the New Orleans Museum of Art dedicated the Sydney and Walda Besthoff Sculpture Garden adjacent to the Museum in City Park in New Orleans. The nearly five-acre garden was designed to display a permanent collection of over fifty sculptures by twentieth and twenty-first century American, European, Latin American, Israeli, and Japanese artists.

The original landscape design called for *Iris pseudacorus*, the European native, rather than the Louisiana iris. Hurricane Katrina did relatively little damage to the unique and fascinating sculptures, and the magnificent live oak trees survived. The lingering brackish water destroyed much of the understory planting, however, including the *I. pseudacorus*. A virtual blank slate was created along the lagoon banks, an open invitation for the return of the irises that once grew wild in the area and that properly belong there.

Several Louisiana iris growers and enthusiasts, including Bois d'Arc Gardens and Plantation Point Nursery, were among the volunteers who emerged to participate in the garden's rebirth. These growers donated Louisiana iris rhizomes by the thousands. The plants were maintained in pools and tubs at a temporary wetland plant facility in the Park and planted out by multiple groups of volunteers in several waves over a couple of years.

In 2009, Pamela Buckman, the Manager of the Sculpture Garden, offered the GNOIS the opportunity to establish a planting of named and labeled Louisiana iris cultivars. In 2010, an area behind the Eugenie and Joseph Jones Family Foundation Cascade Pool was provided for a Louisiana Iris Display Garden. The purpose of the Display Garden is to showcase good growing, readily obtainable cultivars. GNOIS helps maintain the Display Garden and uses it for a variety of educational programs throughout the year. The Sculpture Garden has also hosted guest irises for conventions in 2014 and 2018.

Each spring, the Garden hosts a Louisiana Iris Rainbow Festival, a one-day event with music and presentations on the irises. It offers the public an opportunity to enjoy the entire Sculpture Garden at a particularly beautiful time of year.

The original Sculpture Garden is now restored, gorgeous, and fascinating, but an exciting expansion is planned that will more than double the Garden's size in 2019. The expansion will incorporate a beautiful, contiguous area along the lagoon. Planting plans will focus more on native plants and will include masses of four Louisiana species native to the State. The expanded Sculpture Garden will be more welcoming than ever to the community, boast fabulous new sculptures, and display both species and hybrid Louisiana irises in every imaginable color along the banks of the lagoon.

Linda Trahan

Admission to the Sculpture Garden will remain free, a wonderful gift from the Besthoffs to the public.

Botanic Garden at Independence Park

The site of the Botanic Garden in Baton Rouge's Independence Park was a small plane airport prior to the mid-1970s. When airport operations shifted elsewhere, the land was donated for public purposes, including the creation of a Botanic Garden under the Baton Rouge Parks and Recreation Department, BREC.

A garden design was created that called for various areas devoted to roses, crape myrtles, herbs, and Louisiana irises. A fine daylily collection has been added in recent years.

The Louisiana Iris Garden is large and consists, at the lower end, of a series of curved, sunken beds along paved paths. At the upper end are three long, rectangular "test beds" filled with Louisiana irises.

The newest development is the construction of an Iris Pavilion between the upper and lower sections of the Iris Garden. The Iris Pavilion was included in the original master plan for the Botanic Garden and was constructed in the past several years. The Pavilion completes the most extensive formal garden in the region devoted to Louisiana irises.

The original iris collection was donated by the late Joseph Mertzweiller of Baton Rouge, a prominent hybridizer of Louisiana irises who was instrumental in the creation of the garden. Mertzweiller devoted much of his hybridizing effort to developing tetraploid Louisiana irises. Tetraploid irises have double the chromosome count of the usual diploid irises and, consequently, thicker petals and foliage. They also, in theory, create greater possibilities for variation in their offspring, although this has yet to be demonstrated in Louisiana irises. That said, the Mertzweiller tetraploids are very nice irises, and the Botanic Garden at Independence Park is the place to see them.

The credit for this fine, well-designed setting for Louisiana irises goes in several directions: to the vision and dedication of Joe Mertzweiller in pushing for and planning the garden and assembling the irises for the initial planting; to the foresight of the city in dedicating the space; and to BREC for its oversight and maintenance.

Located at 7950 Independence Blvd. in Baton Rouge. Admission is free. Open in daylight hours seven days a week.

The unique infrastructure of the Louisiana Iris Garden would not matter, however, if there was not gardening expertise applied in working with the plants. The day-to-day work required to assure a beautiful bloom each spring is in the hands of volunteers. Over the years, a group led by Claire Fontenot has worked on a weekly basis in the Louisiana Iris Garden to attend to the needs of the irises and also to those of a large collection of daylilies and other plants interspersed among them.

Gardeners clearly understand the growing conditions and persistent dedication required, and a large public planting presents issues of maintenance that transcend even the considerable challenges of a large home garden. A good appearance to the public requires continual maintenance, and Louisiana irises outside a wild wetland are not care free.

The results in this garden are gratifying. The Botanic Garden in Baton Rouge's Independence Park is a prime regional attraction and a fabulous place to see a wide variety of Louisiana iris cultivars. With the continued dedication of its volunteers, it will remain so.

LSU Burden Museum and Gardens

The LSU Burden Museum and Gardens consists of 440 acres in the heart of Baton Rouge. A donation of the Burden family, the huge tract today contains the Rural Life Museum, Windrush Gardens, and the LSU AgCenter Botanic Garden.

The Botanic Garden is diverse and expanding. It encompasses several specialty gardens, such as those featuring roses, camellias, and gingers; and it includes 150 acres of woods, a rain-fed wetland called the Black Swamp, a developing Arboretum, and facilities that invite community participation. These include a conference center, pavilion, and orangerie. Burden hosts an array of horticultural organizations and events, and it has created a special garden for children's activities. Extensive space outside the Botanic Garden is provided for agricultural and horticultural research.

The Rural Life Museum is regarded as one of the country's best specialty museums. Its seven acres contain fascinating 19th century rural buildings, tools, utensils, furniture, and farming equipment. The Rural Life Museum alone is worth a trip to Burden.

Windrush Gardens sits adjacent to the Museum. Originally, Windrush consisted of three and a half acres around the Burden family home, but it was expanded to 15 acres by the late Steele Burden, who also was in charge of landscaping on the LSU campus for many years. Windrush features semiformal gardens with winding paths, extensive statuary, and lots of shade in many areas. The periphery includes several small, connected ponds. Most of the Louisiana irises at Windrush grow here, but there is an additional, small pond at Burden that is full of older irises, particularly *I. virginica.*

Many of the Louisiana irises at Windrush were donated by Joseph Mertzweiller many years ago. They are well established along the shallow edges of the ponds. For a graceful display, it is hard to beat a mass of older, open-form Louisiana irises growing at the water's edge, as Windrush amply demonstrates.

The Black Swamp contains huge old tupelos, and it looks like a place that naturally should be a setting for Louisiana irises. It is likely that, historically, *I. fulva* and *I. brevicaulis* occurred nearby, but they are plants found on the edges of swamps, not deep inside them. In 2016, GNOIS through Benny Trahan donated both swamp-dwelling species, *I. giganticaerulea* and *I. nelsonii*, which have become established and are thriving. *I. fulva* was also donated and planted at the Swamp's edges. The Black Swamp is now an excellent location to see these species from a boardwalk in a natural setting, but without a trip closer to the coast.

Burden Museum and Gardens is a fascinating place. It is a great horticultural destination that has endless potential for future development and service to the community.

Above, old Louisiana cultivars around the Windrush ponds. Below, scenes from the Black Swamp boardwalk and an expanding clump of ***I. nelsonii****.*

Lafreniere Park

Lafreniere is a 155-acre urban park located in Jefferson Parish. It is highly diverse with multiple uses and facilities, including sports fields, picnic areas, boating, fishing, jogging paths, and a conference center, among its many features.

The park is home to a huge and diverse assortment of waterfowl. Partly to help with water filtration, the park has created long, floating islands planted with an assortment of water plants, principally Louisiana irises. The varieties of irises appear to consist of species and older cultivars. In bloom, the islands provide a beautiful display, and the planting is unique in the area. Nothing else even resembles it.

The park also maintains open green spaces, lawns, landscaped gardens, and a man-made marsh environment. Louisiana irises have long graced the marsh area, primarily the species types of irises.

Palmetto Island State Park

Palmetto Island State Park is a recent addition to the Louisiana park system. The park is located on the Vermilion River south of Abbeville in Vermilion Parish. The 1,300-acre property was purchased by the State for $1.5 million in 1981. It was a farsighted investment.

Development of the park was 30 years in the making, and actual construction began in 2002 with opening to the public in 2010. The park offers a real South Louisiana outdoor experience. A boat launch provides access to the river for fishing and boating while the interior lagoons allow canoers and kayakers a close-up look at the native plant and animal life.

The park features a large planting of *I. nelsonii*. From the park, the natural habitat of the iris in the Abbeville Swamp is almost directly across the Vermilion River. Park topography is similar to the swamp where *I. nelsonii* developed, which consists of private lands threatened by agricultural practices and lowered water levels. The hope is that Palmetto Island State Park will provide an accessible home for *I. nelsonii* where the public will be able to enjoy the species from a boardwalk.

I. nelsonii *transplanted to Palmetto Island State Park, Abbeville*

N. O. Botanical Garden

The New Orleans Botanical Garden offers the richest, most varied display of plants in the City. Art deco design is evident, and the twelve acres are home to 2,000 varieties of plants surrounded by the live oaks that are characteristic of the Park.

A sunny corner of the Shade Garden has a significant, dedicated planting of newer Louisiana iris cultivars. There are also numerous individual clumps scattered throughout the garden. These are interspersed with the garden's wide variety of plant material.

Opened to the public in 1936 as part of a Works Progress Administration project, the New Orleans Botanical Garden was the first public classical garden in the City. It suffered massive damage in Hurricane Katrina, enduring three feet of brackish water for a week and power outages thereafter. It is entirely recovered today and a wonderful place to see plants of all types in a beautiful and interesting setting.

Kathy McNamera

Jean Lafitte Barataria Preserve

The Jean Lafitte area, about 20 miles south of New Orleans, is a prime locale in which to see irises in the wild. *I. giganticaerulea* inhabits the plentiful swamps and wetlands.

A spring trek to the Barataria Preserve of the Jean Lafitte National Historical Park and Preserve is a tradition for many. There are extensive boardwalks from which to view the plant life and birds. Multiple walking or longer hiking trails are accessible.

The Town of Jean Lafitte also has a boardwalk through swampland. That trail, particularly near the beginning, has large clumps of *giganticaerulea*.

The irises in the Jean Lafitte area took a major hit from Hurricane Rita, which followed shortly after Katrina in 2005. The storm pushed in saltwater that damaged the irises. They are slowly recovering from this setback and are approaching their pre-hurricane state – well worth seeing, and getting better every year.

Gary Salathe

Gary Salathe

*GNOIS' **I. fulva** display board at the Northlake Nature Center.*

Northlake Nature Center

The Northlake Nature Center occupies over 400 acres along Bayou Castine on Highway 190 east of Mandeville and across from Fontainebleau State Park in St. Tammany Parish. The site offers three different ecosystems: hardwood forest, pine-hardwood forest, and pond-swamp. The ponds in the cypress swamp area are the result of beaver dams.

In 2016 and 2017, GNOIS member Gary Salathe orchestrated the donation and planting of all five species of Louisiana irises, which are now growing in a natural environment and visible to visitors from trails and boardwalks.

Members of GNOIS prepared a series of poster-size exhibits on each of the species that are featured in the Nature Center's display kiosks. There is no other spot where there is such ready access to both the Louisiana iris species and information about them.

Iris virginica is also well represented at the Northlake Nature Center. Although not in the Louisiana group, it is a beautiful native iris and common on the North Shore.

"A Louisiana Pond"

Gary and Leigh Anne Salathe's pond near Madisonville is testimony to inspired vision and perseverance. The pond is in a subdivision common area adjacent to their home. With the farsighted support of the developer, Gary has turned it into a beautiful and unique destination.

"A Louisiana Pond" displays a mix of irises, including all five species (even *I. hexagona* from Florida), a few natural hybrids, and old and new hybrid cultivars. It is evolving year to year with more and more hybrids to accompany the original planting that included lots of *I. giganticaerulea* and *I. virginica*, a native iris not in the Louisiana group.

Heritage Park

Heritage Park in Slidell is a multi-purpose park with many attractions for adults and children. About seven years ago, the park installed an ambitious 20' x 250' mass planting of Louisiana irises set between a paved walking path and a winding waterway.

The iris garden was the idea of Wanda Beelman with the Slidell City Council and inspired by the Sculpture Garden in City Park, New Orleans. With the help of Keep Slidell Beautiful, plans for the planting were developed, and it was estimated that 2,500 rhizomes would be needed for the initial planting. Several growers and gardeners donated rhizomes, principally Benny Trahan of Slidell. Members of Keep Slidell Beautiful alongside 45 community service volunteers planted, fertilized, and mulched the 2,500 irises.

This planting has endured and created a beautiful display each spring since 2010. Heritage Park welcomes the public to yet another spot in which to view fantastic Louisiana iris cultivars.

LSU Hammond Research Station

The LSU Hammond Research Station is located on a 150-acre site six miles east of the city of Hammond. It was established in 1922 as the Fruit and Truck Experiment Station to serve the strawberry and vegetable industries in the region. The Research Station now focuses on landscape horticulture, including testing, selection, fertility, weed control, and plant growth regulators for the landscape and nursery industries. Each year it evaluates more than 500 ornamental plants and releases a list of Super Plants that perform well in all areas of Louisiana and adjacent southern states.

Through donations from iris growers and enthusiasts, the first Louisiana iris beds were planted in the summer and fall of 2013. Those on tour at the 2014 SLI convention in New Orleans were able to see an impressive collection of irises in bloom, but the Hammond Research Station was severely damaged by extensive flooding in 2016. Most plantings had to be replaced. The irises survived but were set back, especially by conditions in the aftermath of the floods.

Plantings at the Hammond Research Station are highly varied and laid out in a very attractive manner. They are not arranged in the rows that one might expect of a research facility. Garden areas are devoted to shade and sun plants, daylilies, roses, and a host of new, native, and unusual perennials. A more recent planting of Louisiana iris species around a retention pond emulates a natural environment.

Greater New Orleans Iris Society

The Greater New Orleans Iris Society welcomes participation in a wide range of engaging activities. These consist of regular meetings and programs, iris raffles and cultural demonstrations, an Annual Louisiana Iris Sale, preservation and restoration projects, volunteer days in the Sculpture Garden and in the GNOIS iris plantings, and special events during bloom season.

The Greater New Orleans Iris Society has a more varied focus than many plant organizations. It is not just a group of gardeners with an interest in a particular plant, although it is that, too. GNOIS places strong emphasis on our native, wild irises and the need to preserve – and in some cases – restore them in our environment.

Richard Drouant

GNOIS Projects and Activities

The organization is fortunate to have access to a large area in City Park in which to grow out both species and cultivars of Louisiana irises in sufficient numbers to make donations to public plantings possible. GNOIS projects include:

Louisiana Iris Species Preservation Project. GNOIS grows over one hundred forms of the five Louisiana species as part of a Society for Louisiana Irises project to preserve the diversity of forms of these irises.

Northlake Nature Center, Mandeville. GNOIS members have begun planting species irises in a swamp setting. The Center is one of the few places where all five species are grown in a safe and accessible natural setting.

Propagation and Restoration Project. GNOIS is accelerating the propagation of species irises in both public and private locations to provide stock to donate for future public plantings.

The Louisiana Iris Rainbow Festival in the Sydney and Walda Besthoff Sculpture Garden. This is a one day event in the spring offering an opportunity to view the mass plantings of Louisiana irises around the lagoon and in the GNOIS Display Garden, to see the amazing sculptures, and to tap into good information on the irises.

Louisiana Iris Day at Longue Vue. Each spring the Society has supported a Louisiana Iris Day event in the Wild Garden at Longue Vue House and Gardens. The Wild Garden is the home of an historic and beautiful iris collection. The Louisiana Iris Day is free and laid back, a relaxing late afternoon treat offering the opportunity to stroll through the irises and talk with other iris enthusiasts and experts.

Iris Shows. GNOIS periodically holds formal Louisiana Iris Shows judged by accredited American Iris Society judges. Cut iris scapes are displayed in bottles, and awards are given for seedlings and for cultivars that best exhibit the standards of good growth and form established by AIS. Anyone can enter an iris. Shows are an opportunity for growers to display their skills, but more importantly, they offer the public a chance to see a large number of the latest Louisiana irises in one place.

Linda Trahan

Top, Lorrie Brown and Linda Trahan at a volunteer day; above, the 2016 Iris Sale at Longue Vue in October. Left, a section of entries at an Iris Show at NOMA.

Bayou and Marsh
News from the Greater New Orleans Iris Society
For membership information go to
www.louisianairisgnois.com/Membership

Society For Louisiana Irises

The Society for Louisiana Irises is the premier Louisiana Iris organization in the country. Since its founding in 1941, SLI has been dedicated to the promotion of these plants.

SLI has been the source of significant publications over the years. This includes its newsletter, now a full color quarterly journal, *Fleur de Lis*. SLI periodically produces special publications, and it was responsible for the definitive book on Louisiana irises.

The Society holds annual conventions and juried Louisiana iris shows. The public is eligible to enter irises into cultivar and seedling classes. Shows are judged by accredited American Iris Society judges.

The Society's website provides comprehensive information on the organization and the irises. The site covers all aspects of iris culture, with tips for all parts of the country. It provides news of awards won by the latest iris cultivars.

SLI has long been an independent organization that now participates as a Section of the American Iris Society.

SLI was responsible for the definitive book on Louisiana irises. This and other publications are available through the Society's Storefront (see page 25). All SLI members receive its quarterly color journal, ***Fleur de Lis****.*

For membership information, go to:
www.louisianas.org/index.php/membership

SIGNA

Species Iris Group of North America

SIGNA is devoted to studying the entire iris family both in the wild and in the garden. The organization disseminates scientific and cultural information to members and to the public through its website. An annual seed exchange is a particularly popular and valuable activity.

Full information about SIGNA is available at *www.signa.org*.

The American Iris Society is a national organization with a very broad interest in all types of irises. It contains both Regional organizations and Sections that deal with all major groups in the genus *Iris*.

The organization publishes a beautiful quarterly magazine, ***IRISES***. AIS offers an optional electronic membership through which the publication can be viewed online: *www.irises.org.*

Locations and Links

Greater New Orleans Iris Society
www.louisianairisgnois.com
www.zydecoirises.com
www.facebook.com/GreaterNewOrleansIrisSociety

Society for Louisiana Irises
www.louisianas.org
www.facebook.com/LouisianaIris

American Iris Society
www.irises.org

Master Gardeners of Greater New Orleans
www.mggno.com

Species Iris Group of North America
www.signa.org

Longue Vue House and Gardens
7 Bamboo Road, New Orleans
www.longuevue.com

Sydney and Walda Besthoff Sculpture Garden
(Adjacent to New Orleans Museum of Art)
https://noma.org/sculpture-garden/background

New Orleans Botanical Garden
1 Palm Drive, City Park
www.garden.neworleanscitypark.com/

Lafreniere Park
West Napoleon and David Drive, Metairie
www.lafreniерepark.org/

Baton Rouge Botanic Garden
7950 Independence Blvd.
www.zydecoirises.com/Inspiration/BatonRougeBotanicGarden.html

Burden Museum and Gardens
4560 Essen Lane, Just off I-10, Baton Rouge
http://www.burdengardens.com/
http://www.lsuagcenter.com/portals/burden/

Palmetto Island State Park
19501 Pleasant Road, Abbeville
https://www.crt.state.la.us/louisiana-state-parks/parks/palmetto-island-state-park/

Northlake Nature Center, Mandeville
U. S. Highway 190, Mandeville
Across from Fontainebleu State Park
http://northlakenature.org/

Jean Lafitte Historical Park and Preserve, Barataria Preserve
https://www.nps.gov/jela/barataria-preserve.htm

Louisiana Iris Growing Tips

Location

- Provide at least a half day of sun
- Avoid dense tree roots – trees will out-compete the irises for needed moisture
- Regular beds are fine – boggy conditions are great, but not necessary
- Can be planted in iris-only beds or mixed with other plants, provided that water needs are met
- Not necessary to amend South Louisiana soils for pH

Soil Preparation

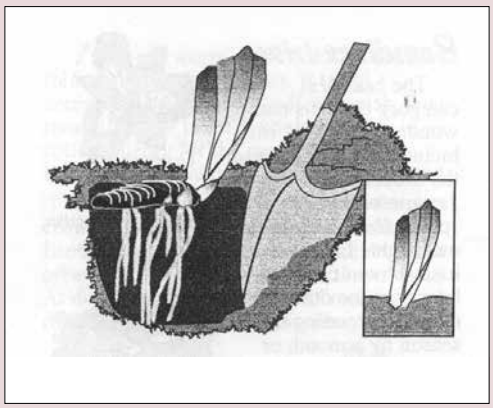
- Dig in 3-5 inches of compost or other organic matter
- Work in commercial or organic fertilizer (equivalent of 1 lb of 8-8-8 per 10 square feet of beds)
- Okay to top dress with fertilizer after planting instead of working it into soil

Planting

- Time to divide and plant is in the fall, preferably September or October, just as the new growth cycle begins
- Space irises with room to "walk," approximately 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 fine bark
  - 2-3 inches is best

Maintenance

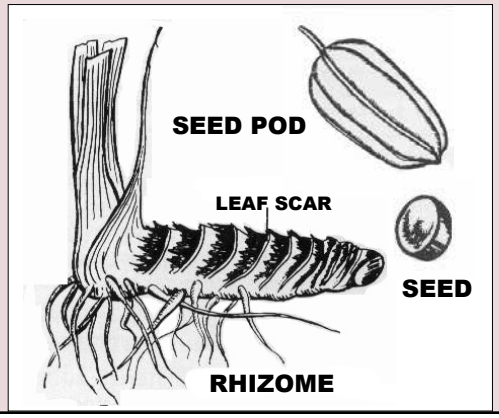
- Fertilize established beds in September-October and again in February
  - In fall, 1 lb 8-8-8 per 10 square feet or equivalent
  - Same amount in late Feb.
- Discard foliage that yellows
  - Do not compost
  - Decomposed foliage may transmit a minor fungus disease called "rust"
- Keep beds moist
  - Irises should be kept ***consistently*** moist – irises in beds that dry out will have unattractive foliage in summer and spring bloom may be reduced
  - Replenish mulch as needed



- Remove stalks after bloom to keep clump attractive
- Remove seed pods to avoid unwanted seedlings
- Divide irises after 3-4 years (when they become crowded and/or bloom is reduced)

Propagation

- *Rhizome Division*:
  - A rhizome blooms only once, but its offsets will bloom in subsequent years



  - Additional offsets from a bloomed-out rhizome can be created
  - Cut 2-3 inch sections from spent rhizome and place in pot with a medium of sand and peat or something similar
  - Cover with a ¼ to ½ inch of the medium and keep moist, but not soggy
  - In many but not all cases offsets will develop
  - Plant out when offsets are at least six inches tall and roots have formed
- ***Seeds***
  - Growing from seeds will produce plants that differ a little or a lot from the parents
  - After bloom, seed pods will become apparent within days or weeks
  - The seed pods typically will mature around July 4 in South Louisiana
  - Harvest when pod begins to yellow
  - Cut pods carefully to remove seeds – score surface ~¼ inch deep
  - Keep seeds damp until they can be planted – dry seeds will germinate, but they will be delayed up to a season
  - Plant seeds in pots with good growing medium, with each seed covered to about ½ inch
  - Monitor to be sure that seeds do not become exposed
  - Put pots in a shady location, keep moist but not soggy, and expect germination to begin with cool nights in October or November
  - Seedlings can be planted out by late February

Society for Louisiana Irises Storefront

THE LOUISIANA IRIS: THE TAMING OF AN AMERICAN WILDFLOWER

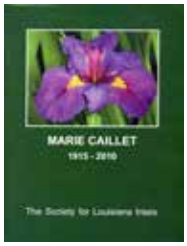
Contributing Editors: Marie Caillet, J. Farron Campbell, Kevin C. Vaughn, and Dennis Vercher
Details: 254 pp, 111 color photos, 5 watercolors, 21 b/w photos, 14 line drawings, 11 tables, hardcover.

This authoritative treatment by The Society for Louisiana Irises is based on the first edition published by the Society in 1988, but it is considerably expanded. It covers every aspect of the history, botany, and development of these distinctive irises, with particular emphasis on the newest hybrids, hybridizing techniques, and cultural practices, and also includes suggestions for their use in the landscape and in floral arrangements. It should serve to introduce a wider gardening public to these colorful and versatile flowers. - $30.00

Special Publication of the Society for Louisiana Irises - The History of Hybridizing (2007)

This Special Publication of the Society for Louisiana Irises is a 100-page summary of how the “ditch irises” of Louisiana have been tamed and introduced into American gardens. Contents include informative articles on such early pioneers as Mary Swords DeBaillon, Caroline Dorman, and Percy Viosca; the Shreveport and Lake Charles groups, the California hybridizers, and a wide variety of other contributors to the development of the Louisiana iris. Includes 30 color photographs of outstanding cultivars. Paperbound. - $5.00 plus $2.00 shipping within U.S.

Special Publication of the Society for Louisiana Irises honoring Marie Caillet (1915-2010)



This is a very high quality publication that pays tribute to Marie Caillet, a charter member of SLI, longtime editor of the SLI newsletter, and the "grandmother" of SLI for many of us. This is a 52 page 8.5 x 10 publication in full color with many pictures of Marie, species Louisiana irises, Marie Caillet Cup Winners with pictures, a listing of SLI Distinguished Merit Award winners from 1989 to 2010, and memories of Marie written by several members of SLI. - $10 plus $3 shipping within US

Louisiana Iris Hybridizers 1985-2010

This is a paper bound booklet consisting of 99 pages of color pictures, the Marie Caillet Cup Winners from 2001 to 2010 with color pictures, the Mary Swords DeBaillon Medal winners from 1986 to 2010 with color pictures and many articles written by the hybridizers during the period 1985 to 2010. This is a companion book for the Special Publication of 2007, which contains information on the hybridizers from the beginning to 1984. - $5 plus $2 shipping within US

Special Publication of the Society for Louisiana Irises 1995

This paper bound special publication, edited by Marie Caillet and Joseph Mertzweiller, consist of 86 pages and contains "a half-century of progress", information on hybridizers, the development of the tetraploid LA irises, information on LA irises in Australia, culture of LA irises and many beautiful pictures of LA irises. There is a limited supply of this publication remaining so get them while they last. - $5 plus $2 shipping within US

The SLI Louisiana Iris Checklist CD!

The CD checklist is illustrated with photos of many of the cultivars and it can be displayed in three formats. It has a powerful search feature that allows you to search the checklist by cultivar attributes such as name, date of introduction, hybridizer, parentage and much more. The checklist lists names, descriptions, breeder/ introducer and parentage of iris cultivars from the 1920's through the present. The iris are grouped by year of registration and/or introduction. The CD will cost $10 for delivery to the United States,

Any of these products & other Iris materials can be ordered from the SLI Treasurer Ron Killingsworth. For shipment outside US please contact Ron Killingsworth directly for pricing