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MAY/JUN 20



STEVEN L. CHAMBLEE

In true Texas fashion, some of Max Clark's bearded irises bloom alongside bluebonnets. The iris collection has grown to nearly 3,000 varieties as Clark Gardens anticipates visitors arriving in North Texas for the convention of the American Iris Society this spring.

Magic Max and the Love of Iris

His 35-acre garden is on the American Iris Society's 2013 itinerary

Steven L. Chamblee

It happens every spring, usually the first week of April. The phone rings, and on the other end is another Fort Worth horticulturist, whipped into a froth of excitement. It might be Paul Schmidt or Stephen Haydon or Richard Hartman, but regardless of who it is, they always say the same thing ... "The irises are peak-

ing at Clark Gardens!" Without further explanation, work excuses are quickly fabricated, and 90 minutes later, we are all floating through a sea of gossamer blossoms of every conceivable color.

Now your basic gardener might say, "Aren't everyone's irises also in bloom then? What's the big deal?" To that, I can

only answer, "Was Michelangelo just a painter, Lincoln just a president, and Edison just a tinkerer?" Clark Gardens, just east of Mineral Wells, is **the** place in North Texas to immerse yourself in irises, and not making this annual pilgrimage is horticulturally sacrilegious. Collection numbers usually ebb and

flow between 1,500 and 2,000 different varieties, but with the impending American Iris Society visit this April (see page 35), a tidal wave of new irises has landed at the garden, pushing the numbers upward toward 3,000. Word on Hort Street is that this is **the** year, and the phones will be ringing like church bells on Easter Sunday. (Yes, that's a blatant hint to visit Clark Gardens on March 31, while both you and the garden are all gussied up for the holiday.)

I sat down to lunch with Max Clark, the man behind the magic at Clark Gardens, to find out more about this fascination with irises. When asked, "Why irises?" the octogenarian told me matter-of-factly, "They are about the easiest thing to establish." The dead-pan delivery of this information, followed by a simple, tacit nod told me that I would have to do a little digging to cultivate the whole story, which I discovered did indeed have roots.

Max Clark planted his first iris in 1973. His wife, Billie, was the sister of an amateur iris hybridizer and the aunt of a professional, so advice was free and the price was right as well. His immediate success with irises made him realize that he could depend upon them to carry the garden while he was planting other things. As their garden grew, so did the number of irises. "Every bed at Clark Gardens has had iris in it at some time. As the other things grew larger and began to crowd them out, I would simply dig the iris and move them to a new area. And I'm still doing it. Forty years now ... seems to work."

Clark acknowledges that they require a certain amount of soil preparation to grow successfully, and he has developed his own method of creating an iris bed. He says candidly, "I am not saying this is how anyone else should do it. I'm just saying this is how I do it." First, he rototills the area, then rakes the soil into foot-wide mounds spaced about 20 inches apart. He plants iris into the top of the mounds, fills in the "valleys" with compost, then mulches the whole thing. He adds, "I've planted every iris in this gar-

Nearly every bed at Clark Gardens has contained iris like these bearded beauties at some time in the gardens' development. Iris hybridizing runs in the family.



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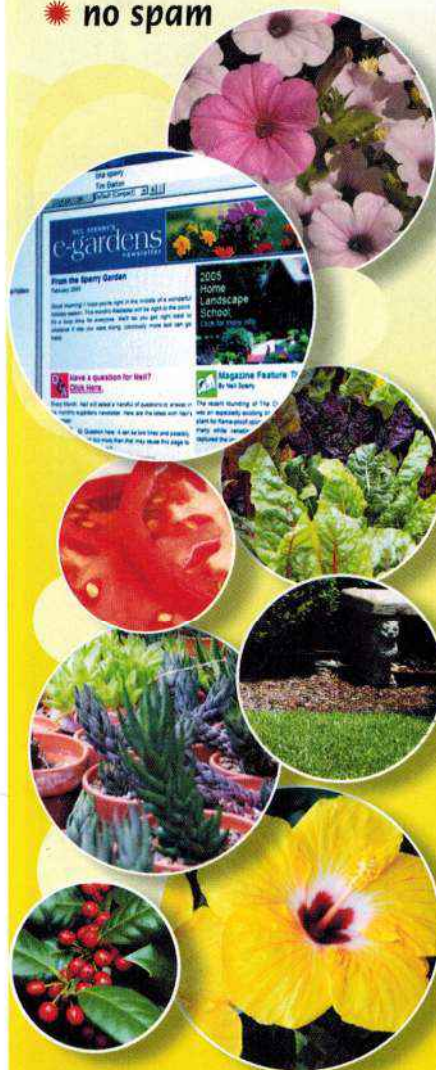
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The 35-acre Clark Gardens Botanical Park west of Fort Worth welcomes visitors all year long, not just with bluebonnets and iris, but with lake breezes, fall color and wildlife like peacocks, herons and egrets. The 2013 Spring Festival takes place April 13 and 14.

den, and this method seems to work well for me.” Suddenly, Clark drops his chin to his chest, apparently to hide a guilty schoolboy grin, so I am forced to lean down to catch his eye. Head still down, he confesses with gleeful contrition, “I spend two-thirds of my day on my knees gardening.” I laugh so hard the waiter comes over to see if I’m all right.

I inquired further about his hands-on obsession, recalling the time I found him out in the garden on a 104 F day in July, his toes-up feet sticking out from under a behemoth ‘Mermaid’ rose. At first, I thought he was dead, then I startled when he shouted, “Hello!” When I found out he was removing the old, zillion-sharptined, dead canes with a folding saw, I asked him, “Mr. Clark ... you’re over 80 years old ... don’t you have some staff around here to do dangerous stuff like this?” Serious as a judge, he said, “Oh no ... I could never ask **them** to do this. They might get hurt.”

Tough as a boot outside, Max Clark also has a softer side. “Irises are a nostalgic kind of flower ... something from your grandmother’s garden,” says Clark, who

admits to having a few favorites. At the top of his list is ‘Billie Yvonne’, a tall, bearded, bi-tone hybrid named for his late wife, followed closely by ‘Verna Elizabeth’, a peach-colored iris named for his mother. He notes that he sees beauty in each individual plant, just as he does in people.

Ever the realist, Clark quickly reminds me that irises have limitations. “True enough, they’re great for a spring display, but they do not benefit from hot Texas summers. I wouldn’t use them in the front of a perennial bed, because they can look a little ragged from June to August.” He reminds me that poor drainage can also lead to crown rot, so irises are good candidates for raised beds. Iris scorch and Southern blight are two serious iris diseases that are best prevented by buying clean plants rather than attempting a cure with extensive sanitation and chemical methods. He also notes that people may play a role in some iris problems, as humans have hybridized some irises to the point where they are weak, seeking exotic flower color over strong plant vigor.

While acknowledging that no plant is foolproof, including iris, Clark gives a



Max Clark works indefatigably on the Clark Gardens grounds near Mineral Wells. He is shown with Master Gardener Lee Ann Nave and Chocolate. Clark Gardens is one man's true labor of love. The busy octogenarian admits to spending "two-thirds" of his day on his knees gardening.

American Iris Society comes to Texas

The Iris Society of Dallas is hosting the American Iris Society's 2013 Convention, April 15-20, 2013. In addition to the AIS Flower Show and a full slate of educational meetings, attendees will visit 10 spectacular gardens, including the Dallas Arboretum and Clark Gardens. Visit www.irises-dallas.org for all the details.



Selecting Irises

Writing a magazine article about iris is a bit like writing a short story on the Pacific Ocean; no matter what, it will be terribly inadequate. Botanically speaking, there are about 250 species of *Iris* worldwide, depending upon whether you are a "lumper" or a "splitter." Horticulturally speaking, *Iris* are first split into bulbous and rhizomatous groups, which are then further divided into Dutch, English, Reticulata, and Junos groups (all bulbous), and bearded, beardless, and crested groups (all rhizomatous). This seems simple enough until you factor in easy hybridization, which then explodes the number of named *iris* to more than 80,000 different cultivars. Yikes! How do you navigate your way through these waters to find the *iris* that's right for you? The same way you embark on a Pacific voyage ... ask the locals. Your local chapter of the American Iris Society, local Master Gardener group, and local independent nursery can help you chart a course for *iris* success.

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few pointers to ensure *iris* success for the average gardener, and he keeps it simple. Make sure your soil is well-drained. Use compost liberally. Plant your *iris* rhizomes at the soil surface; don't bury them. When dividing *iris*, lift the plants and leave them out of the ground for about three weeks to let the rhizomes dry, which will reduce disease. When replanting, don't crowd your *iris* by planting too close together.

Come visit Max Clark and his *irises* this spring. If nature times it right, you will see a blanket of bluebonnets pierced by *iris* and peonies, with first-bloom roses billowing like clouds in the background. Please excuse me, my phone is ringing already. ★

About the author: Steven L. Chamblee is chief horticulturist at Chandor Gardens in Weatherford. He is a contributing editor to this publication.