Blossom Time
EVERY BLOOMING THING
A Tyler garden laughs in flowers and color

VERSATILE VIBURNUMS
Seasonal variety in striking foliage, flowers and fruit

SWEET CORN
Tantalizing picks for gardens large or small
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 Hayden or Richard Hartman, but regardless of who it is, they always say the same thing ... "The irises are peaking 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.
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 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 takes 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.
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-scarred, 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 expensive 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
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 irises 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 iris 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 Chander Gardens in Weatherford. He is a contributing editor to this publication.

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.

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.

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