

# Historic Irises

*Preserving Beauty from the Past*

*- Nancy McDonald & Cathy Egerer -*



Honey Glazed



Blue Rhythm

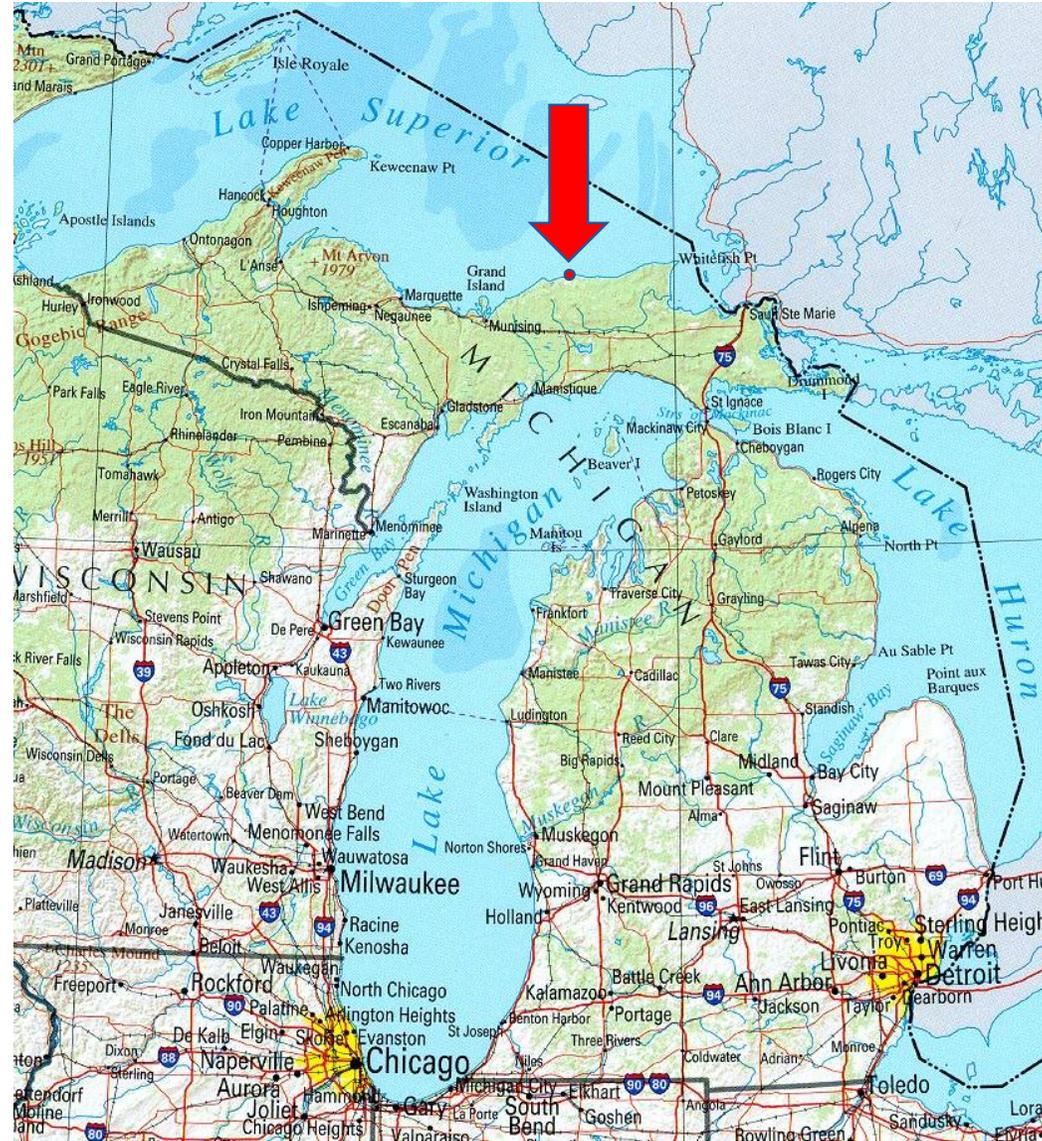


City of Lincoln

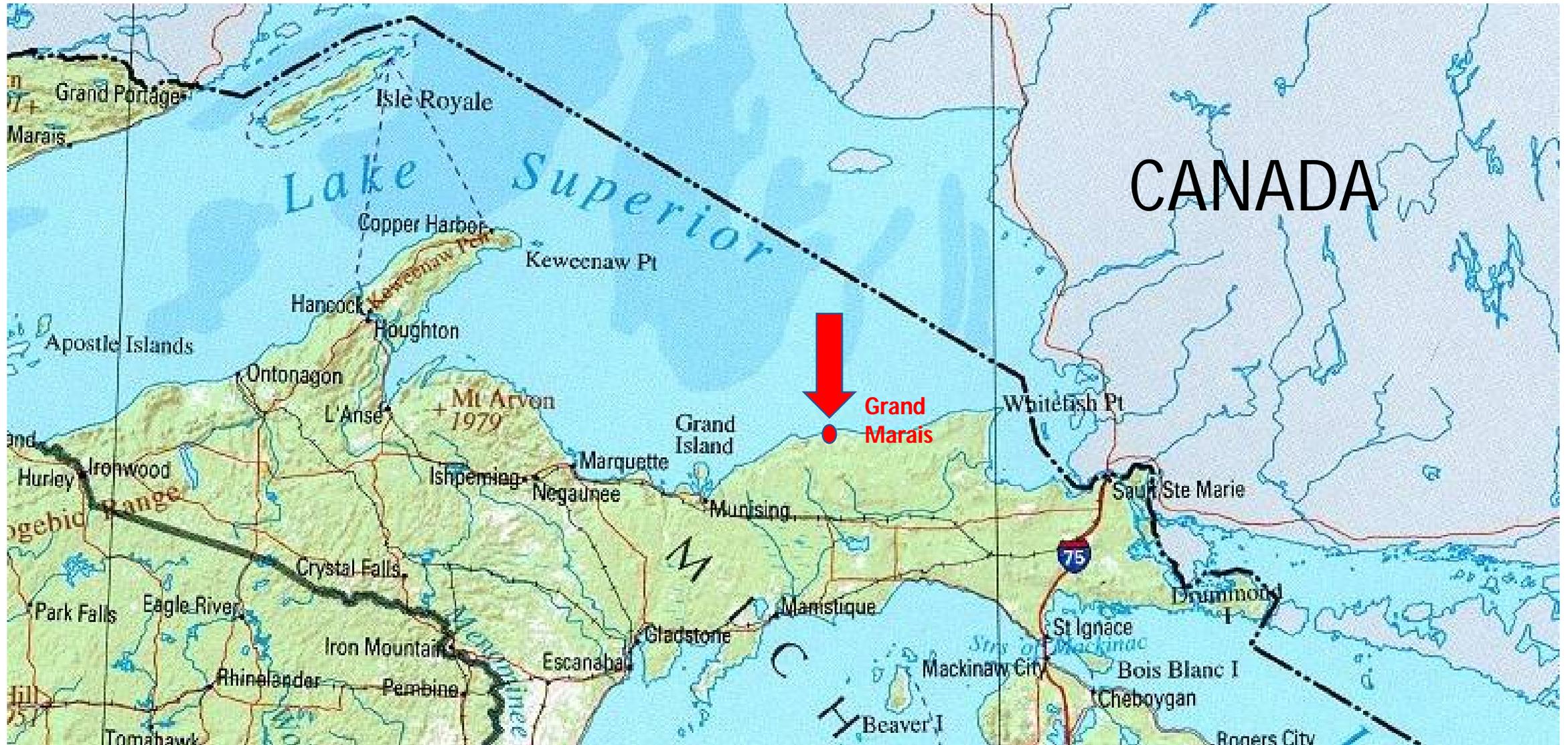


Pink Lace

# Waving Hello (aka: "You live *WHERE?*")



# Waving Hello (aka: "You live *WHERE?*")



# Welcome to Grand Marais!



Population: 300 - ish

Short growing season:  
June 9 – September 15  
Frost-free with luck

+ Heavy snowfall:  
320 in. 2024-25

+ Cold winters

+ Sandy soil

+ Up to 18 hours of  
daylight in summer

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= HAPPY IRISES!

# A Large-Scale Rescue

2014: With the help of dear friends, I rescued 630+ cultivars (6000+ rhizomes) and moved them to our village



The garden grew to more than 1,825 cultivars,  
almost all of them historic and endangered.





# Beardless & bearded irises of all classes... all have historic cultivars



Siberian



Spuria



Japanese



Louisiana

Pacific Coast  
Native



# An Iris Timeline: Who Did What, and When?



# 1500

Henry VIII is ruling England. The lovely white species *Iris florentina* might be growing in his palace garden.



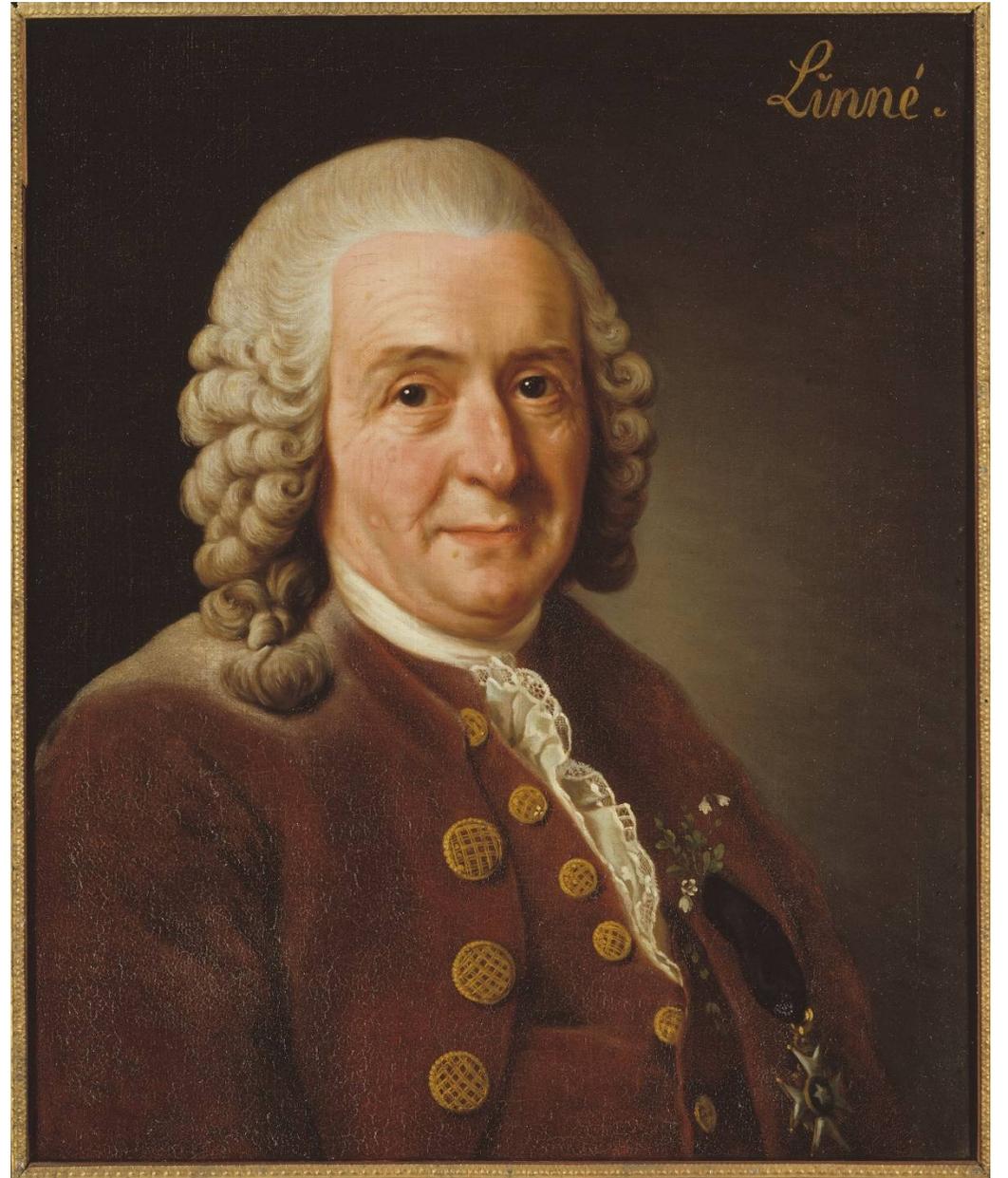
# Meet the Pioneers

**Carl Linneaus**

**1707 – 1778**

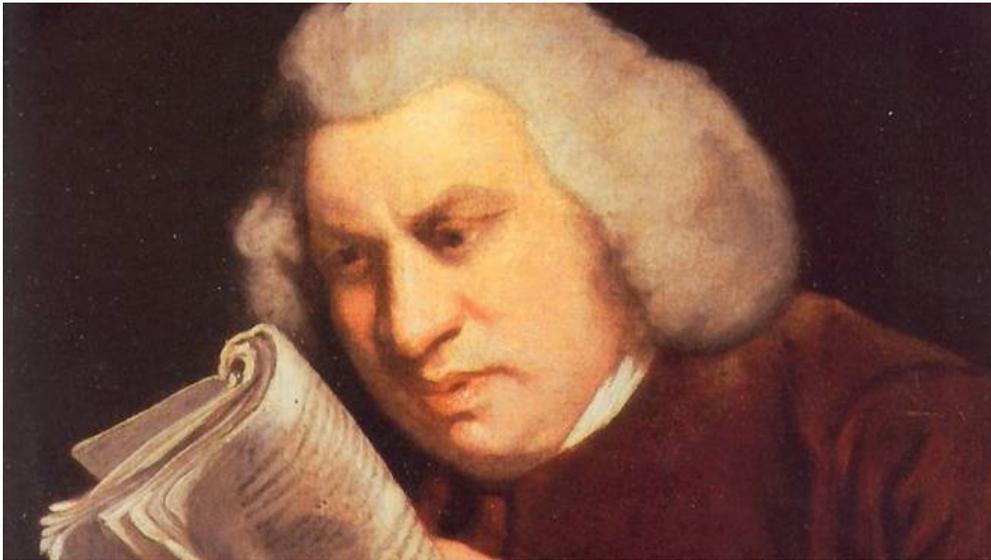
The “Father of Modern Taxonomy”, he formalized *binomial nomenclature*, or the scientific system of naming living organisms in two parts: genus and species. There are about 280 species of the genus *Iris*.

**Ex:** *I. pallida*, *I. aphylla*, *I. variegata*



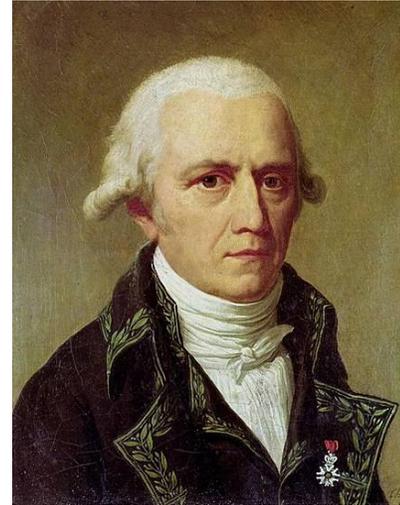
# 1755

Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary* is first published, an enormous feat for a man with very poor eyesight. *Iris variegata* may be in it; Carl Linnaeus named it in 1753.



# Meet the Pioneers

**Jean-Baptiste Lamarck**  
**1744 - 1829**



Lamarck collected and named several species iris, including *I. pallida* and *I. plicata*, that are ancestors of today's modern irises.

- Native to the northern Mediterranean coast
- Tall, slender stalks, sparse branching, papery spathes, scent like grape soda
- Grown for use in perfumes (orris root)



# 1840

The Oregon Trail opens the way for settlers to the American West. In France, Jean-Nicholas Lémon introduces 'Jacquesiana'.



Jacquesiana

# Meet the Pioneers

**Jean-Nicholas Lémon**  
**1817 - 1895**

Lémon inherited his father's Paris nursery in 1837. Over time, he introduced 150+ cultivars and was the first hybridizer to lift irises to an important garden plant. How did he do it?



'Othello'



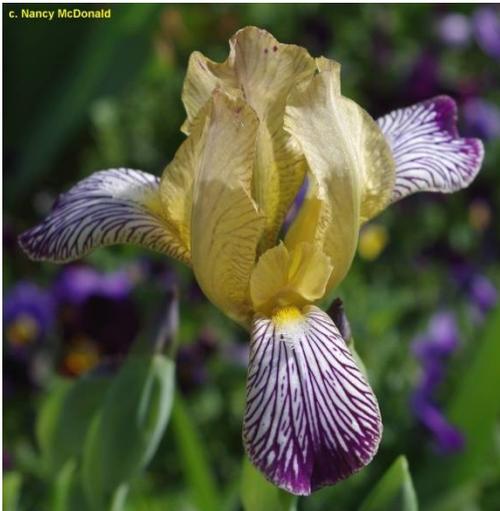
'Victorine'



'Fries  
Morel'

Lémon's system was simple:

- Gather various forms of *I. pallida* and *I. variegata* and their hybrids
- Let insects pollinate them
- Plant the seeds from their pods
- Wait several years for flowers
- Name the best ones and sell them



Only a dozen or so of Lémon's irises remain. Their genes, however, are found in many of today's modern introductions.

'Faustine' (1859)



'Innocenza' (1854)



'Mme Chereau' (1844)  
A sensation in its day



# 1869

The first transcontinental railroad is completed, spanning North America. The beautiful Japanese iris, *Iris ensata*, is introduced in the U.S.



'Queen of May'  
(John Salter, 1859)

Hybridizers around Europe soon followed Lémon's example and began crossing irises and naming them. 'Queen of May' was one such example.

All of these early irises were *diploid*, having 24 chromosomes.

By the late 1800s, diploid crosses were becoming exhausted. Sir Michael Foster, in England, asked missionaries to look for and send him any irises they found in Asia Minor.



# 1885

The Statue of Liberty arrives in New York – in pieces. In England, Michael Foster begins crossing *diploid* irises with several new *tetraploid* irises sent to him from Asia Minor. Irises will never be the same.



'Amas', collected in Amasya, Turkey. It has 48 chromosomes, twice that of diploid irises. (a.k.a. 'Macrantha')

Crossing diploid and tetraploid irises resulted in TBs with greater height and substance. It wasn't easy. Most pods were sterile. Record-keeping was spotty.



'Oriflamme' : tetraploid (Vilmorin, 1904) from 'Amas'



'Caterina': tetraploid (Sir Michael Foster, 1909) Bred from tender *Iris mesopotamica*



'Isoline' (Vilmorin, 1904) is a triploid, between a diploid and a tetraploid; bred from *Iris trojana*

# 1917

America enters World War I, and the famous 'I Want You' poster debuts. In England, Robert Wallace introduces 'Dominion' for his friend Arthur Bliss. The "Dominion Race" would soon revolutionize the iris world.

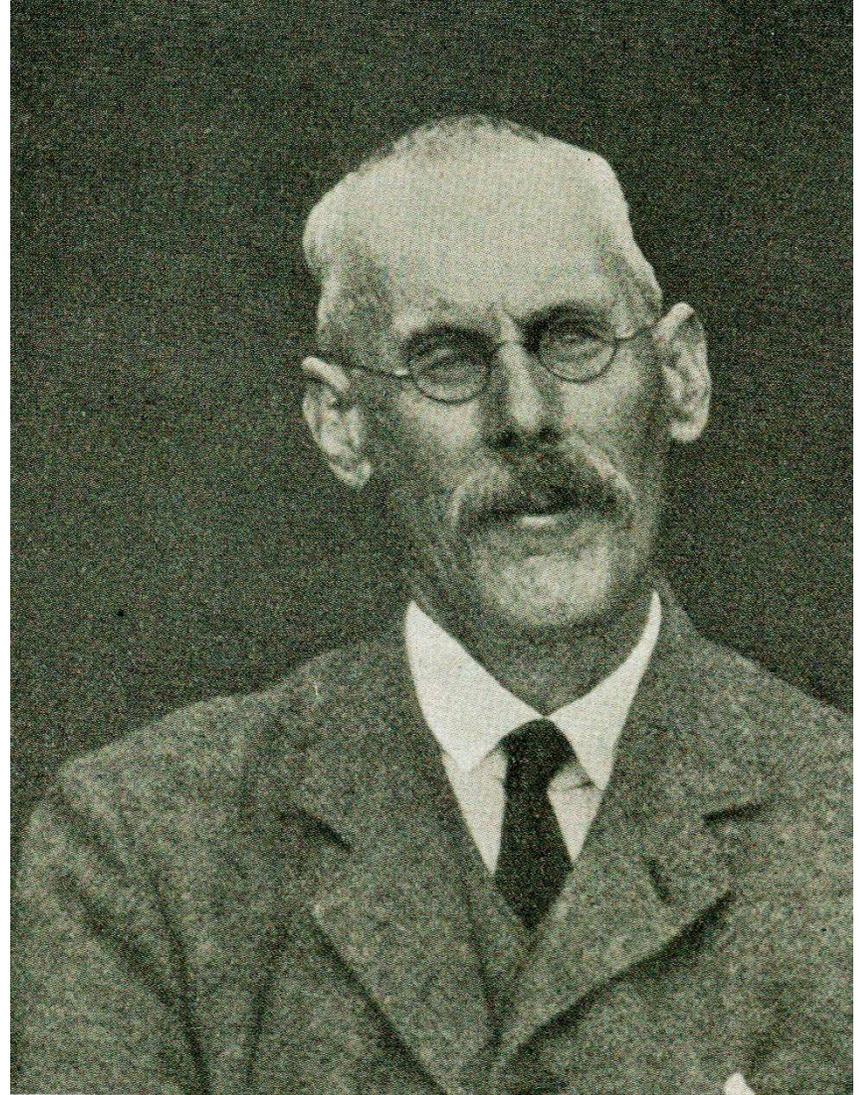


# Meet the Pioneers

**Arthur John "A. J." Bliss**

**1862 - 1931**

- Arthur kept exceptionally detailed records and was very choosy.
- In 1922, out of 473 seedlings that flowered, he kept only four.
- His great ambition was to create a crimson iris. This quest inadvertently led to 'Dominion', one of the most important irises ever bred.



Arthur J. Bliss, age 60

## The 'Dominion' Story

- In 1905, Arthur crossed 'Amas' with 'Cordelia', hoping to get a red iris. A pod with two seeds resulted, and one of the seedlings took hold and flowered in 1909.
- In 1910, his ten-year-old niece Phyllis visited and told him the seedling was the best iris in the garden. Arthur kept it, though it was not red. It thrived in the gravel and silt of his allotment.
- In 1916, nurseryman Robert Wallace visited Arthur. He bought all of Arthur's stock of the seedling, 12 large clumps and more than 80 rhizomes.



'Cordelia'  
X  
'Amas'



## Marketing 'Dominion'

The year was 1917 and England was at war. How could Robert Wallace drum up interest in the newly-named 'Dominion'?

- Describe it in glowing terms
- Publish photographs in the Wallace catalog
- Offer it at an unheard-of price:  
£5.00 per plant  
(More than \$500 today)

After the Armistice, it took years for the stock to multiply enough to fill the orders.



Note the cone-shaped standards and flaring falls, unique at the time.

## The Impact of 'Dominion'

- One of the most important breeding irises ever introduced.
- Found in the lineage of thousands of TBs today.
- Most modern red-purples and blue-purples carry its genes.

*However....*

'Dominion' has a tendency to be short-lived in many climates.



## The 'Dominion' Race

Within a few years, it was discovered that 'Dominion' had a bad habit of just dying out for no reason. Luckily, by this time Bliss had bred four important irises from it. These became known as "The Dominion Race". Note they are inching closer to red.



'Cardinal'  
(Bliss, 1919)



'Bruno'  
(Bliss, 1920)



'Mrs. Valerie West'  
(Bliss, 1925)



'Grace Sturtevant'  
(Bliss, 1926)

# 1918

The Spanish Flu pandemic causes 21 million deaths worldwide in just four months.

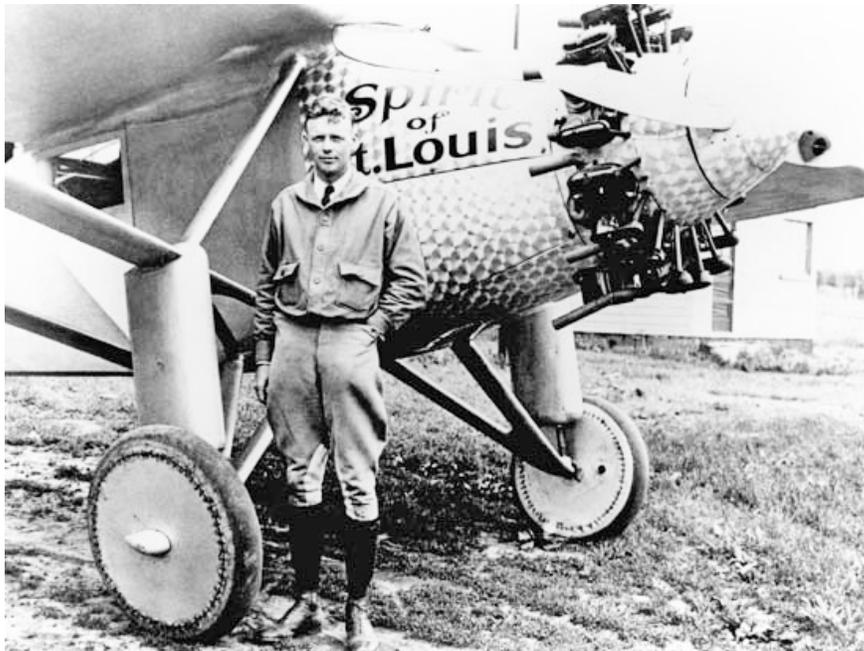
American hybridizer E. Bruce Williamson introduces 'Lent A. Williamson', possibly the most commonly found old garden iris in the USA due to its extreme hardiness. LAW is the perfect iris for a beginner gardener. It's as beautiful as it is tough, and it's an excellent parent plant.

Often found as a NOID – an iris with No ID – in cemeteries and old gardens.



# 1927

Charles Lindbergh crosses the Atlantic in the *Spirit of St. Louis*. Miss Grace Sturtevant, the first woman iris hybridizer of note, introduces 'Cameliard', the first tetraploid variegata.



# 1945

World War II ends. New Zealand hybridizer Jean Stevens introduces 'King's Jester', described as a "fancy plicata".



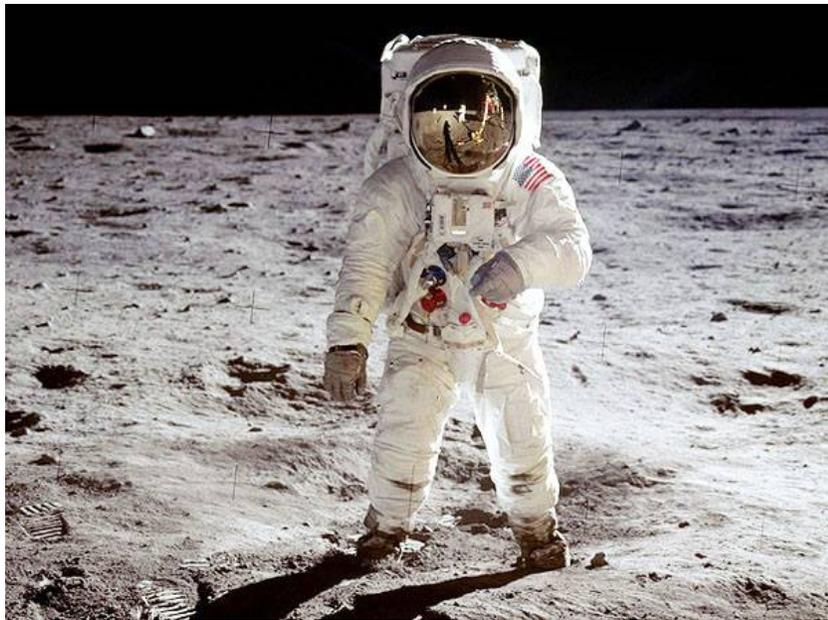
# 1954

Roger Bannister breaks the four-minute mile barrier. Lloyd Austin introduces 'Unicorn', the first horned iris and the parent of the "Space-Agers".



# 1969

Apollo 13 lands on the Moon. Caroline DeForest introduces 'Bayberry Candle', called "a new color" with its brassy green overtones.



# 1986

Halley's Comet approaches Earth for the second time in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Allan Ensminger introduces 'Batik', setting off a new wave of hybridizing in broken-color irises.



# Ruffles, Lace, Flounces, Horns, Spoons, Broken Colors, and More...

From those early diploid irises came today's assortment of modern cultivars. Where will iris hybridizers go next?



With the founding of the American Iris Society in 1920 and the British Iris Society in 1922, it became possible to register new irises and record their parentage.





HISTORIC IRIS  
PRESERVATION SOCIETY

What is HIPS?



(And what is a “historic iris”, anyway?)



HISTORIC IRIS  
PRESERVATION SOCIETY

HIPS – largest section of the AIS, with more than 930 members in 48 states and 12 countries.

Founded in 1988 when a group of historic iris enthusiasts grew concerned at their rate of disappearance.

Mission: To preserve historic irises and educate the public on growing them.



'Neglecta'



## **HISTORIC IRIS:**

**An iris that was introduced into commerce 30 or more years ago (1996 or earlier).**

HIPS uses the introduction year, unless it is not available, and then the year of registration is used.

# Why Grow Historic Irises?



'Aphrodite'  
(W. R. Dykes, 1922)



'Timeless Moment'  
(Schreiner, 1983)



Left: 'Brasilia'  
(Schreiner, 1961)  
Right: 'Crinkled Ivory'  
(Schreiner, 1958)

# They're beautiful!



'Black Valor'  
(Nicholls, 1938)

'Repartee'  
(Kenneth Smith, 1968)



'Going My Way'  
(Gibson, 1971)

# They're tough!



'Blue Boy'  
(Sir Michael Foster, 1913)



'Taj Mahal'  
(Sturtevant, 1920)



'Vingolf'  
(Goos &  
Koenemann, 1924)

# They're a living link to the past



'Mme Chereau'  
(Lémon, 1844)

'Mme Chereau' was introduced in 1844, the same year Samuel Morse sent his first telegram.

There were 26 stars on the US flag. Texas had not become a state yet.

US population: less than 18 million.

**180 years later**, this iris is still beloved by gardeners for its beauty, grace, and hardiness.

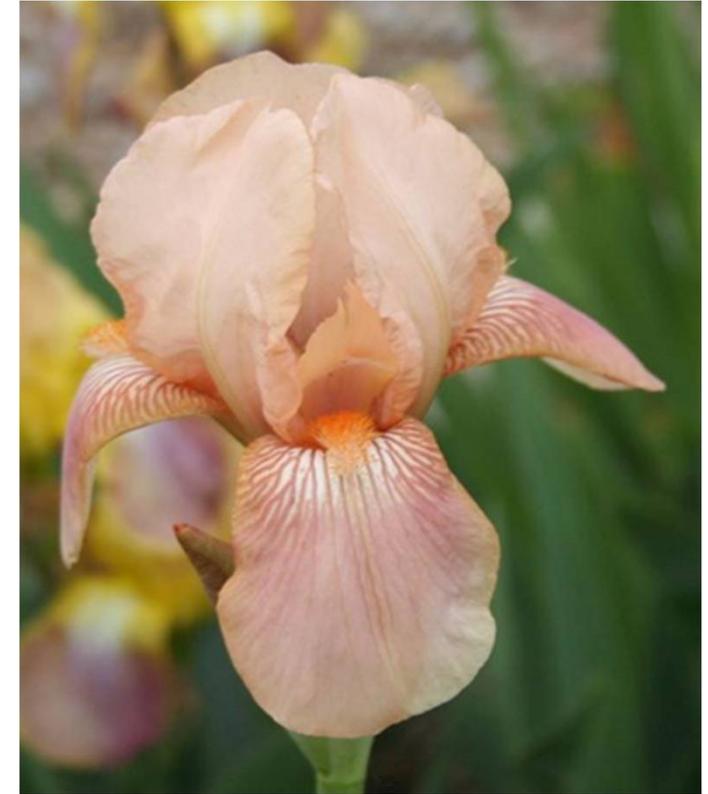
# We help preserve the iris gene pool

As in the Heirloom Vegetables movement, planting historic irises helps preserve their genetics.

All modern irises descend from these simpler, more tailored forms of irises. They are the foundation of all irises grown today.

We are losing irises every day, including some introduced in the last several decades.

We invite you to help us preserve the beauty of the past for future generations to enjoy.



'Pink Lace' (Sass, 1945)

# Are you a history buff? These are living antiques.

## Historic Iris Theme Garden Ideas

- Choose irises that match the date or era in which your house was built.
- Select irises that match important dates in your family history, such as
  - birth years of parents, grandparents, children
  - marriage years
  - special events such as graduations
- Irises whose names represent a special interest of you or a loved one. An example for grandchildren: 'Tooth Fairy', 'Piggy Bank' 'Bedtime Story', etc. They aren't all historic yet, but they will be!

# HIPS Preservation Programs

How do our members prevent irises from disappearing?



'Al-Lu-We'



'Lohengrin'



'Lighthouse'

## The HIPS Member Databank: Who's Growing What?

HIPS members are asked to send in a list of their irises each year so we can figure out which irises are most in need of Guardian Gardens help. The lists are kept strictly private and only the Databank Chairperson has access to the gardener's name and location.

**About 16% of HIPS members send a list. An interactive submission form on our website makes it easy.**

The irises in the Databank and the number of members growing each one are listed on the HIPS website.

*This information is critical for preservation!*



'Rialgar' (Sturtevant, 1924)

# Guardian Gardens Network

If an iris is grown by 2 commercial vendors and 4 HIPS members ***or fewer***, the iris is placed in the GG program.

A GG member will

- grow it
- confirm its identity
- divide it
- share it with other GG members
- repeat
- After several rounds of division and sharing, the iris will hopefully be safe enough to place in the HIPS sale and offered to the public.

'Copper Frills'  
(Whiting, 1941)



We also work with commercial vendors and public gardens to establish GG irises.

We currently have 180+ active members in the network, and we are growing more than 5,300 cultivars for division. Members report their holdings once each year.

# Start a Focused Collection

Members collect, grow and share irises

- From their favorite breeders
- From particular eras (ex: 1950s pinks, pre-1930s, historic French irises)
- Special collections such as Dykes Medal winners
- Other collections of their choice

Other members can help find missing irises.  
Irises are reported once each year.



**Grace Sturtevant** → Sharlot Hall Museum, Prescott, AZ; four HIPS members (inc. Canada)

**Col. J. C. Nicholls** → two HIPS members (CT and NJ)

**Agnes Whiting** → Iowa Arboretum; Yavapai College, Prescott, AZ; three HIPS members (inc. England)

# Become a HIPS Display Garden

HIPS members who enjoy sharing their gardens can become a Display Garden. They must have at least 15 **labeled** historic irises in the garden, open for viewing at least once a year, either on a schedule or by appointment. Display Garden members receive a sign to post in the garden and are listed on the HIPS website and in *ROOTS*.

**2025: We had 47 Display Gardens, up from 35 in 2020. In 2026 we will have our first Display Garden in Germany. Do you know of a private or public garden that might want to be a Display Garden?**



# Our Latest Effort: International Iris Exchanges

We are working with gardens in Europe to bring back irises that have disappeared here, and to find irises that are missing from European gardens and collections.

**2021:** HIPS sends 27 iris cultivars (about 90 rhizomes) to Merian Gärten in Basel, Switzerland. They are relocating their huge iris garden of over 1,500 historic iris cultivars.

**2023:** Some of Merian Gärten's irises are ready to divide. They send us 90 cultivars from breeders such as Cook, Douglas, Kleinsorge, Schreiner, Sturtevant, and Williamson. Many have not been seen in North America in decades.

HIPS sends another 51 cultivars to help replace their lost irises. 'Eleanor Roosevelt' is among them.



# Merian Gärten, 2024



# Irises shipped to England, 2023



# I have this NOID (UNK, GOK, Mystery)...

Every iris lover has a few favorite irises that are unidentified. It's tempting to browse through the HIPS Gallery or the AIS Encyclopedia and try to put a name on an unknown iris. **PLEASE DON'T DO IT.**

- **Iris photos are not always correct.**
- **Irises look different depending on light, the camera, the computer monitor, etc.**
- **Fine details of an iris are not apparent in many photos.**

The **only** way to correctly identify an iris is to grow the NOID next to a verified iris and compare them at bloom time. If they are a match, they will be **identical**. HIPS can help!



# Love your NOIDs!

Your NOID irises may never have been named to start with.

- Bee pods
- Unnamed seedlings sold by nurseries

Enjoy them for their beauty! They may not have names, but they are just as pretty.

Right: Unknown iris, 1950s-1960s in size and form. A standout in the garden!



## Other HIPS Activities and Benefits

- **Iris Rescues** – we will organize a team of volunteers to dig a garden if an owner can no longer care for it. We can help find homes for the irises. Owners in need of help are encouraged to contact us.
- **ROOTS** is our semi-annual journal, packed with information on all kinds of iris topics. Members receive both issues each year, either as a print version or electronically with an e-membership.
- **E-Newsletter** – members with an email address can receive our periodic e-newsletter, which contains information and alerts in between issues of *ROOTS*.
- **Iris Locator** – we help members find missing irises via *ROOTS* and the e-newsletter.
- **Our website** has information for the public, including a gallery of historic irises. The Member area of the site contains a Forum where members can discuss various topics.

# HIPS Iris Sale in July, online

- Members can purchase during the first two days, then it is open to the public.
- Members donate collections of six cultivars from their own gardens. Many are hard to find. Collections are posted online before the sale opens.
- Orders are placed online and paid via PayPal.
- Rhizomes are shipped directly from the donor to the buyer.
- This year we had some collections of historic NOIDs as well as named varieties.
- Visit **historiciris.org** for updates.

## “Simply Charming” Collection

Graziella (TB Cayeux 1929)

California Gold (TB Mohr-Mitchell 1933)

Serenite (TB Cayeux 1931)

Whisperwood (TB Kirkland 1944)

Black Hope (TB Austin 1963)

Buttercup Bower (TB Tompkins 1961)



**Another reason  
to be glad  
you live in Tucson...**

# Iris borers, aka "@#!\$%#\\$!"



# A New Approach to Iris Borer Control: *Nematodes*



We apply beneficial nematodes to the soil every spring to keep borers in check.

These nematodes live in the soil and attack the iris borer larva before it can reach the rhizome. They enter the body of the larva and destroy it from within.



The nematodes multiply inside the larva, and end up back in the soil.

They are harmless to other animals and to plants. And...

They are over 99% effective.

# Easiest Digging Ever!

Use large pipe clamps to attach a 3" or 4" piece of PVC pipe to a spading fork.



# Easiest Digging Ever!

An entire clump pops out in one go. A real back-saver!



With thanks to Blue J Iris Gardens for this fabulous idea!

The End

gg@historiciris.org

