For Iris Lovers in the Cold Zones

Aurora

Newsletter of the Can-West Iris Society

Spring, 2019 **Volume 13, Issue 1**

Update From the Organizing Committee

Winter 2018-2019 for many of us, particularly in the west, was very cold, very snowy and quite possibly the most 'normal' in many years. Now we just have to get through spring which is the hardest time of the year for iris in cold areas. Time to watch for winter kill, rot and heaving. But also time to watch for the renewal that spring brings and the promise of the coming season. Here's hoping for a great season with a normal bloom progression.

In this issue you will find information on the 12th annual show and sale table (page 2-3) and the 2019 summer members only rhizome sale (page 4). The highlight of the spring issue is the member profile of Dolly Picard and the Gray Beautification Project (pages 4-9) and we finish up with a thought provoking piece by irisarian and writer of all things iris, Tom Waters, on iris fertilization. Sometimes controversial but always enlightening!

In other news, change is coming to the CWIS webpage sometime this summer. Our host server (Serif WebPlus) has decided to stop providing hosting services and we need to find another provider. The hunt is underway. Stay tuned for the summer newsletter for further information on that.

Happy spring!

As always, if you have article ideas, questions or need to contact the Organizing Committee, just send us an email. We can be contacted at:

B. J. Jackson, jacksonb@mts.net
Jennifer Bishop, Jennifer@dataways.com
Deborah Petrie, martyaddict@gmail.com
Eleanor Hutchison, eleanore@mymts.net

CAN-WEST IRIS SOCIETY

12th Annual Iris Show

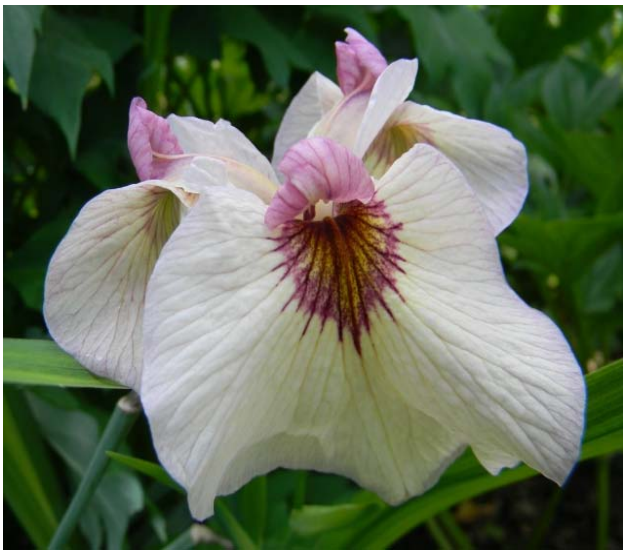
Bourkevale Community Centre

100 Ferry Road
Winnipeg, Manitoba

Sunday, June 9th, 2019- 1:00 to 4:00 p.m.

Free Admission!!!

Show Chair: **B.J. Jackson, jacksonb@mts.net**



Pseudata Hanagara. Photo: Sandy Venton

We Need Your Help!!!

If you can help out, even for an hour or two, please contact: B. J. Jackson at jacksonb@mts.net (or) Deborah Petrie at martyaddict@gmail.com.

Some of the areas with which we will need help include: Set Up. Exhibitor Registration, Classification, Court of Honor Set-Up, Clerking, Information /Membership Table, Sale Table, and Take-Down.

It's a great learning experience plus a great opportunity to talk iris with like-minded individuals. We look forward to your support!!!

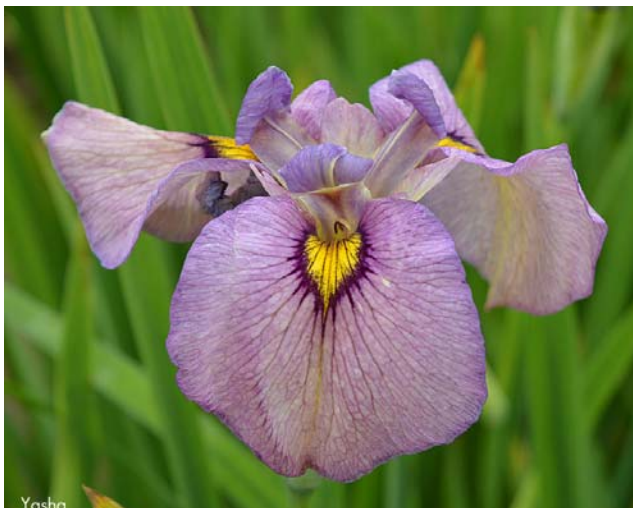
A Special Gift for CWIS

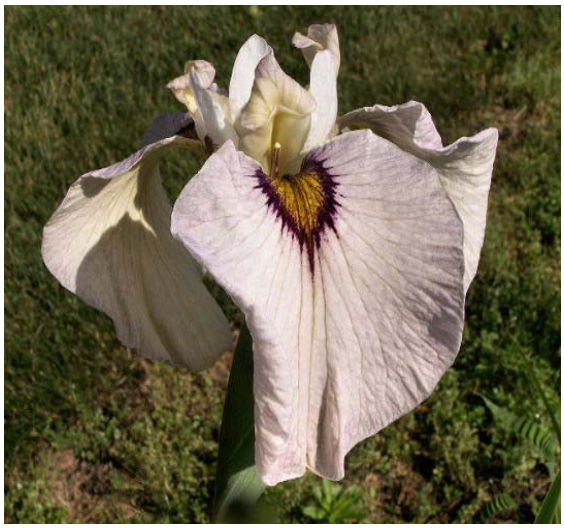
By El Hutchison

Maureen Mark and Sandy Ives, our guest judges at last year's show, barely got home before offering to dig up some Siberians and Pseudatas for CWIS! How awesome was that! BJ and I were soooo excited for the opportunity to make these beauties available for CWIS members and friends!!!

I potted them all up as soon as they arrived, in the middle of August, and potted and potted. WHEW!! I spoke to each rhizome as I tucked it in for a long Manitoba winter nap! And winter's hold has not yet left my gardens. There's still snow all over the back 40, so I haven't been able to check on them this spring, but they all had green shoots by fall when the pots were dug in!

These pseudatas have been grown successfully in our climate for several years, so they are all hardy here! They will be offered at the show sale table so come early for best selection and get one or more of these potted iris for yourself! The prices will be great!!!





On the left is SPX Yasha and on the right is SPX Okagami. These pseudatas <u>may</u> be among those available.

News Flash!!!

The CWIS Rhizome Sale Committee is pleased to announce that confirmation has been received from the 2019 commercial supplier which will be (drum roll please…)

Mid-America Gardens

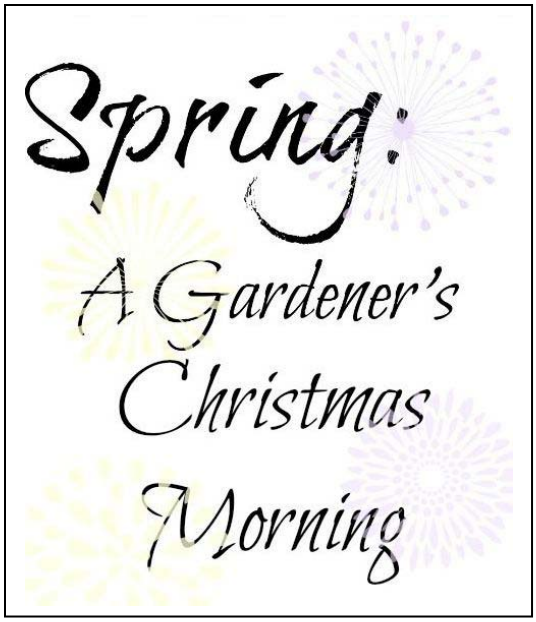
(home of hybridizers Thomas Johnson and Paul Black)

We have been promised a great selection of mostly medians registered and introduced within the past five years. You can visit their website to browse their offerings and start making your wish list at:

http://www.beardedirisflowers.com/

As always, because we get such a great deal on price. even when factoring in the exchange, phytosanitary certificate and shipping), we will not know exactly what is being sent until they are in the mail to us. The last time Mid-America was our commercial supplier was in 2013 and they have released a lot of iris beauties since then. Because of this buying strategy, we are able to offer the newest and best at ridiculously good prices and we pass on those savings to you, our members.

The sale has been set to start the last week in July, subject of course to arrival of the iris on time. Any changes will be communicated to your email inbox and the group Facebook page if necessary.



Member Profile
Dolly Picard

About me,
- I have planted over 500 varieties of irises in my 3000 plus square foot garden since 2012, the number is higher than that, but I eliminated ones from my records that I have actually found the dead bodies for.
- The planting started out with whatever looked pretty, needless to say, I lost a few…which is just a bit of an understatement.
- The goal was to convert my very run down and overgrown yard into a spectacular low maintenance garden before I retire. I still have a couple of years before retirement, but I must say I have hit the garden pretty hard over the last couple of years with irises, lilies, hostas and daylilies.
- After a disheartening amount of losses, I decided to focus on certain hybridizers as there seemed to be a list of hybridizers that most certainly didn't survive my garden on the open prairie. My more current irises of choice are Canadian hybridizers Chuck Chapman & John McMillen.
- I also have a Canadian born hybridizers collection of historics including D. Hall, L. Zurbrigg, W, Miler, R. D. Little, L. Cousins, H. H. Groff, F.C. Morgan &W. Neel.
- Also in my garden is a historic French collection of primarily F.Cayeux's, with a few by J.Cayeux, J. Lémon, L. Millet, P. Verdier & L. Denis.
- And, although it doesn't make sense to me given the pattern of non-winter surviving irises I have planted, I have had very good luck with Keith Kepple irises and my collection of Gibson's. I have learned to not to try to make sense of it, because it isn't just the hybridizer, it seems to also be the luck of planting it in just the right spot in the garden and crossing my fingers during spring thaw.
- I am currently a member of CWIS, AIS and HIPS. My iris collection includes over 200 Historic varieties, and has been designated as a Historic Display Garden by HIPS. I will hang the shingle when I get the weeds totally under control and the layering of other perennials to my liking.
- I am strictly a collector, and do not sell anything from my garden.

And now on to the project which I am spearheading for the local hamlet in the area in which I live, Gray, Saskatchewan.

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Gray, Saskatchewan Beautification Project

Giving Gray a little colour

It all started with a post on the HIPS forum, from Nancy McDonald of the Pickle Barrel Garden in Grand Marais, Michigan. The Pickle Barrel Garden had grown so extensively the last few years, that there was a need to cull the NOIDS, much the same as the Royal Botanical Gardens did when they had to reorganize their historic collection of irises back in 2014.

Nancy offered them on the HIPS website for just the cost of shipping. It was a fabulous opportunity for anyone doing some landscaping. I signed our little hamlet up. I would gladly pay the phytosanitary certificate and shipping for such a haul.
Unfortunately there was another price that couldn't be justified....volunteer time.

Because it would be shipped to Canada, each rhizome would have to be scrubbed by hand with a brush and the box driven 100 miles to be inspected. Her volunteers were also working hard to get ready for the HIPS annual rhizome sale that funds it's organization. They had to use their volunteers efforts wisely given the short window of time they had to work in. She contacted BJ Jackson in Manitoba and came up with an alternate idea.

Flash back to Hamilton, ON, 2014....

Volunteers at the Royal Botanical Gardens in Hamilton, Ontario volunteered their time sorting and labelling irises to revamp the gardens in 2014.

Jacquie MacDonald of Penticton, a CWIS and HIPS member, organized a mail order sale for those of us in the West of the irises being dug up at the RBG sale. Jacquie spent a lot of time , meticulously taking orders for this sale, then taking the trip at her own expense from BC to Ontario, hiring taxis to take her back and forth, putting together parcels for shipping and mailing them out. She managed all those parcels just a week after having surgery on her foot and wrist.

The irises I received personally in this sale, came in good shape and true to their names. There were some that the volunteers at the RBG had mixed up or misidentified and were not what was ordered to their new homes out West.
I stress .....volunteers.

Knowing where they came from, they were indeed historic treasures, their identifications were just not vetted. Brenda Newton graciously offered to park the mixed up irises in the back 40 of her property until they could be identified. That year as well, several donations from Don McQueen were received but were too small for that year's sale, some had lost their names, too, so they were added to the planting. They stayed there for four years, the hardiest surviving our prairie winters and clumping up, and surviving the last few years of drought conditions, much too early spring thaws and below colder than normal winters.

Back to Gray, Saskatchewan 2018....

The call-out to our community:

A notice was put out on our web site to recruit volunteers and come planting day, 41 degrees in the shade, five volunteers planted over 200 iris throughout the community.

"We started at the school first, because the beds are pretty much ready for planting. We would like to enlist the help of anyone who is willing to plant some in their front gardens at least over the winter until a proper bed can be built at the hall and/or wherever else we want to add a little colour. Preference for plants was given to those who will plant in their front yard in the Hamlet so they may be seen from the street.

For anyone wanting a cheap way of dressing up their front yard, they would be able to grow them out into clumps over a couple of years, and then divide them up for donation to other public places around the hamlet, keeping some for themselves or trading with neighbours."

In addition to the volunteers from the local community, other volunteers included:

BJ Jackson
- Where do I start?
Arranging with Nancy MacDonald for an alternate source of irises in Canada that needed a home, digging at Brenda Newton's garden, keeping the clumps separate so there was just one variety per bag (hopefully), shipping them out over two trips; one after digging them up from Brenda's field and another to the bus depot once the CWIS sale was finished with a box of donated leftovers.

Brenda Newton
- for saving the irises and protecting them by planting on her property with the intention of eventually having them vetted, she cared for them for four years .Then helping. BJ dig them up for shipment to us.

CWIS members...sorry, I don't know who all participated
- Those who were aware of our project and decided to do a little culling in their own gardens.

Our local volunteers
- Planting in 41 degree heat, followed up with watering, weeding and landscape ties where needed.

To thank you all adequately is impossible. You spent long hours and hard work on various stages of our gardens, sacrificing your personal time, hard work and care. You took great care to spread the iris love. I do hope you have gained some inner satisfaction in knowing through your efforts, you have made our little community with no budget, a more colourful place to live. This whole project has been inspirational.

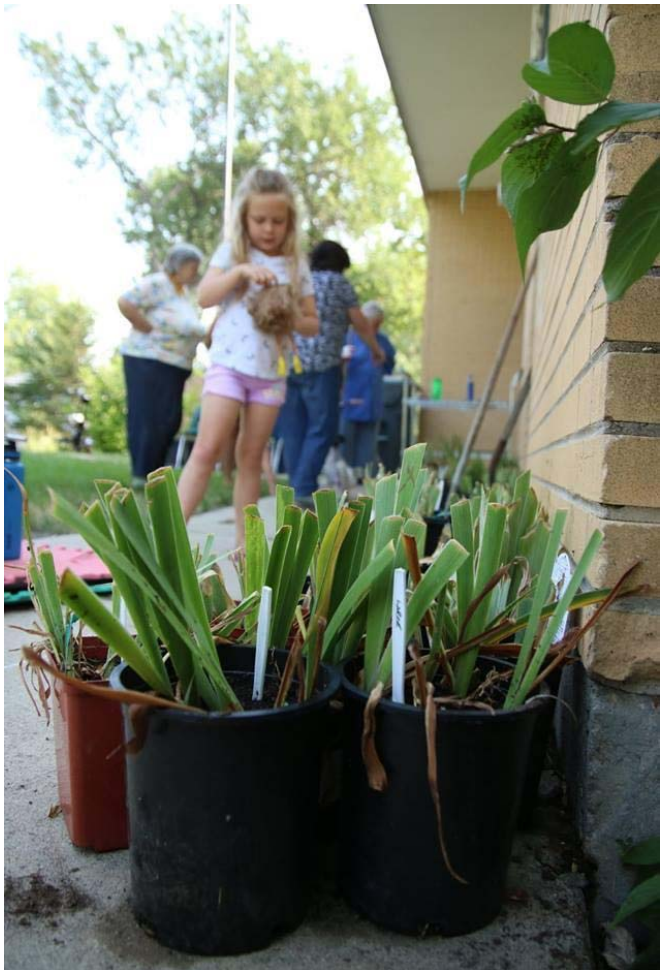
I would like to mention that have a whole new appreciation for historic irises, and for NOIDS in general. If so many gardeners ensured the survival of this small collection just over the past four years, it's beyond my imagination how many have gardeners have toiled to ensure the survival of all the historics we have today, that are well over their 25 year status requirement.

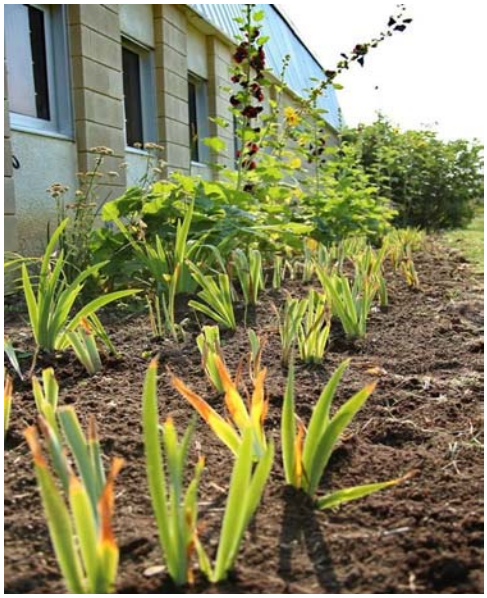
:footnote:
Since the planting at the school, there has been a garden also planted at the central water pump house and the garden in front of the United Church has been revamped with some of the new irises as well as daylilies and spurias donated from one of our planting volunteers who decided that after so many years of growing the same perennials it was time for a change in her front yard, (Happy 70th birthday Nelda).

Dolly organizing some of the irises to be planted

See next page for more photos of planting day. Photos provided by Dolly Picard.


GRAY
SCHOOL





Fertilizing Irises

by Tom Waters

Editor's Note: Fertilizing iris is something every grower asks about at one time or another. In this article, shared with permission of the author, long time iris grower and writer of thought provoking plant articles presents his views on the subject.

When I first began growing irises in the 1970s, the standard advice (and it was not new advice even then) was "fertilize with superphosphate and/or a balanced fertilizer low in nitrogen, such as 5-10-10, in spring before bloom and again in fall". The advice was repeated everywhere, without reference to climate or soil. This was the heyday of the use of synthetic chemicals in the garden. Every problem, major or minor, had a solution that came out of a bag or cardboard box.

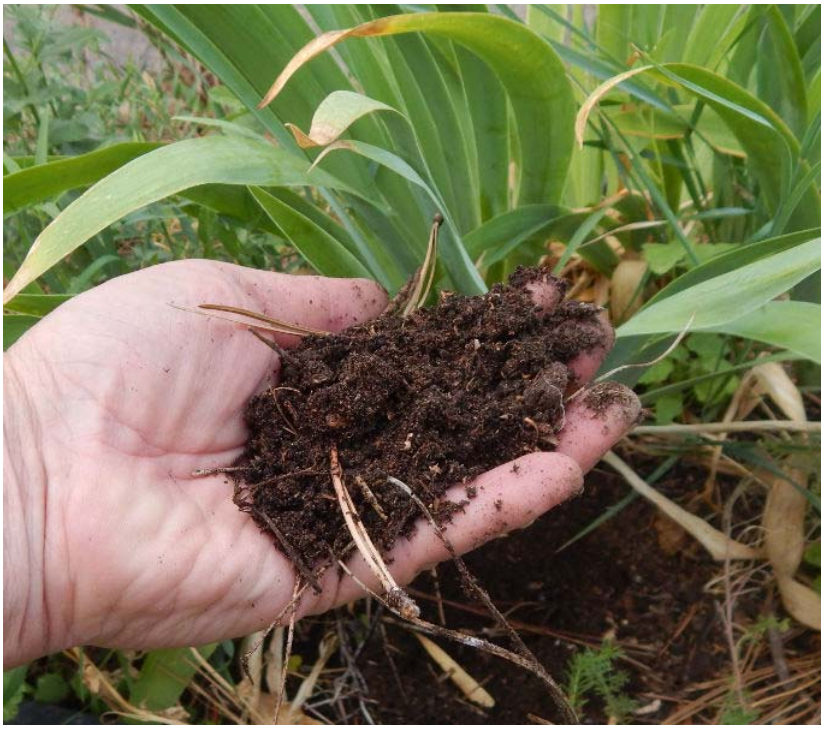
Much has been learned since then that should put a damper of our enthusiasm for synthetic fertilizers. Sadly, however, that knowledge seems to have not permeated very much into the culture of iris enthusiasts. Almost daily, I read the same advice I heard decades ago repeated on Facebook and other discussion fora, still without qualification or any evidence of caution or indeed reflection. People don't even seem to care whether their soil actually *needs* phosphorus; they just follow the advice without question.

Have you ever wondered how plant life has flourished on Earth for more than 400 million years before there were factories to synthesize superphosphate? Have you ever wondered how the great gardeners of Victorian England managed to grow irises without plastic bags of fertilizer granules?

A walk in a nearby forest. Funny, these trees have gotten awfully large without superphosphate each spring and fall.

In nature, the nutrients essential to plant growth are perpetually recycled. All plant and animal tissues contain nitrogren and phosphorus and the other essential elements, and as these tissues decompose, soil microbes process them through stages until the nutrients are once again accessible to the roots of growing plants. Recently, we have become more and more aware of the complex ecosystem of bacteria, fungi, and small plants and animals that exists in healthy soil, and the role they play in sustaining the larger plants and animals that live above ground. Plants on Earth have evolved in conjunction with soil life to make the most use of the natural processes by which nutrients are recycled. Have you heard of mycrorrhizal fungi? These soil fungi exist in symbiosis with plant roots, extracting and processing soil nutrients for the plants in exchange for carbohydrate food which the plant produces by photosynthesis. They can increase the nutrients available to plants more than a hundredfold. This is but one example of the complex interaction between plants and the soil life that supports them. Soil organisms provide many other benefits to plants, such as reducing susceptibility to pathogens.

If nutrients were not recycled through living soil ecosystems in this way, every spot of Earth would become completely barren of life in a short period of time.



This handful of soil contains billions of microorganisms - more microscopic living creatures than there are human beings on Earth.

Feed the Soil, Not the Plants

Synthetic fertilizers bypass this natural process of nutrient recycling in the soil, essentially giving the plants a direct injection of specific nutrients, such as nitrogen or phosphorus. This can be very effective in producing growth, especially if the amount of nutrients available naturally through the soil is small. The agricultural revolution of the twentieth century was made possible in large part by supplying additional nitrogen and phosphorus in this way, thus increasing agricultural yields even in poor soils. But is there no "down side"?

The first potential problem with synthetic fertilizer use is that it affects everything in the soil, not just the plants you grow. All the soil microorganisms now find themselves in a radically different chemical environment, one they are not evolved to deal with. The additional nutrients can cause a population explosion in the microorganisms, which then devour every bit of organic matter in the soil. With the organic matter (their food source) gone, the microorganisms die off, leaving a soil without organic matter and without much life. The plants you grow have gotten their quick boost of nitrogen or phosphorus, and you can pat yourself on the back at how big and green they have become, but beneath your feet the web of life that supports them has been damaged or destroyed. As Tony Avent of Plant Delights Nursery explained, "If all you ate were Snickers bars, would you get larger? Absolutely! No question! You would get dramatically larger. But would you be healthy? That is the difference."

Once the soil ecosystem has been damaged or destroyed, the synthetic fertilizer "boost" becomes an addiction. Without a healthy soil ecosystem, the plants now **need** the regular application of synthetic nitrogen and phosphorus to provide what the soil would otherwise provide naturally. The garden is now essentially an experiment in hydroponics, with the soil merely anchoring the plants in place as you wash solutions of chemicals past their roots.

Organic gardening uses an approach that seeks to enhance the natural nutrient cycling process, rather than bypass and cripple it. By building your soil with compost or other organic matter, the soil life builds up in a sustainable way. The organic matter not only provides the nutrients needed by the plants and the soil life, but also provides that soil life with the carbon-rich organic matter that is its food source. You thus secure not just the short-term benefit of a nutrient injection, but the long term benefits of healthy, living soil.

Nutrient Pollution

That might be enough to make a thoughtful person reconsider reliance on synthetic fertilizer. But there is more. Waterways in the US and indeed all over the world are being destroyed by synthetic fertilizer use, through a process called eutrophication.

When excess phosphorous or nitrogen applied to farms, lawns, and gardens makes its way into streams and lakes, the nutrients create a population explosion of algae that quickly consume available food and and block sunlight, depriving the water of oxygen and choking out the other water life. (Sound familiar? It is not dissimilar to what happens to the soil life when you saturate them with nutrients.) About half our lakes now suffer from eutrophication. The situation has become so severe than eleven states have enacted bans on phosphorus fertilizers. These bans all have various exceptions, so you may not be restricted from spreading superphosphate on your irises, depending on where you live. But it should give one pause for thought. If the environmental damage caused by phosphate fertilizers is becoming so severe that legislatures are trying to stop it, do we really need to be adding to the problem in our home gardens?

Climate Change and Sustainability

Fossils fuels are essential to the production of synthetic fertilizers, nitrogren and phosphorus fertilizers both. We now know that the Earth is plummeting rapidly toward higher global temperatures, faster than ever before in the geologic record, and faster than life can adapt. The Permian extinction, which eradicated 90% of life on Earth, was triggered by a global temperature increase of only about 5 degrees Celsius. We need to think of a better way of meeting our agricultural and horticultural needs, very soon.

The nitrogen for synthetic fertilizers comes from the atmosphere, but the phosphorus must be mined and extracted from minerals. This is a finite resource, and it is already under stress. We need to return to the natural process of recycling the phosphorus that is already incorporated in plant and animal tissues, rather than extracting the last reserves from the ground and poisoning our lakes with excess run-off.

Fertilizer Advice for the 21st Century

So if the advice from fifty years ago is so problematic, what is one to do? Here is how I answer the question of how to fertilizer irises.

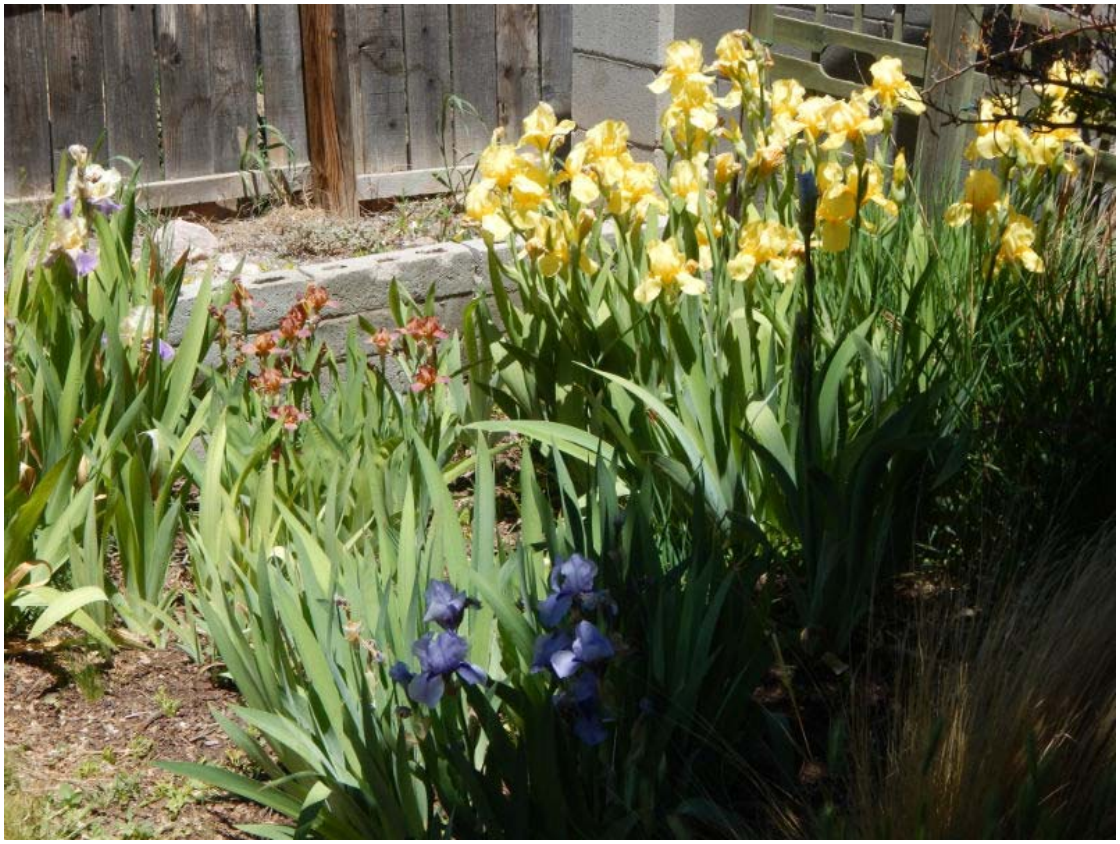
1. Build your soil. Add lots of organic matter. Compost is the form closest to what the plants can use, but even partially decomposed organic matter will benefit the

soil. Not only will you be providing nutrients and encouraging your soil life, but you will be improving the soil's structure, too. Soil with organic matter mixed in holds both air and water better, and has improved texture. This is a win all around. Keep this up.

2. Observe your plants. If you've been building your soil for several years, chances are your plants will be healthy and getting what they need. You'll have Earthworms and insects enjoying your soil too. Now go have a lemonade. Most gardeners will never have to proceed to the following steps.

3. Identify the problem. If there *is* a problem, figure out what it is. If your plants still seem sickly or fail to thrive, have your soil tested. Don't just guess and dump things on your soil, because an advertisement or someone on the internet says a particular product will work miracles. This can do more harm than good.

4. Research solutions. If your soil really is deficient in a particular nutrient, despite all your soil building work, investigate the options for addressing the deficiency. There are organic sources for most nutrients, and those are to be preferred.



Yes, they do bloom.
This bed was planted eight years ago. No synthetic fertilizers have ever been used.

And Finally…

These are messages that not everyone is receptive to. I understand. I started gardening in a time when following that old advice just meant you were a good gardener. Now, it has come under criticism, and some of those criticisms seem to carry moralizing overtones. I, like many other advocates of organic gardening methods, have a certain passion about the subject. But that does not mean I expect everyone who reads this to have some kind of religious conversion and abandon their evil ways. Rather, my goal is more modest. I'd just like to see all iris growers study a bit. Learn a bit about soil. Learn a bit about fertilizer pollution. Learn a bit about organic methods. Then follow up with making a few new choices you are comfortable with, and try them out. Then see what your irises have to say.