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JSRCC Planting Showcases Rebloom

By Mike Locketell

Reblooming bearded irises continue to suffer from an identity crisis. The general public is still convinced grandma's beloved flags only flower once each spring. Summer and fall bloom are simply out of the question. Change is still a tough act to swallow.

Rebloom in Central Virginia requires favorable night temperatures and soil moisture. Optimal conditions led to outstanding late summer and fall bloom in 2004. Flowering commenced on named varieties and seedlings during the final week of July. Bloom did not end until early November. My display and production garden looked like spring in the fall! Could this stellar performance be matched or exceeded in the future? This past year's growing season provided me with a surprising answer.

My growing space for the past five years was located at a dairy farm in rural Powhatan County, VA about forty minutes from my home in South Richmond. Despite attractive yearly rebloom, visitation was a problem. It became clear to me reblooming bearded iris plantings needed to be placed in more public spaces. Some opportunities have recently surfaced to test this theory.

The Richmond area is blessed to have an active ornamental horticulture program at J. Sargeant Reynolds Community College (JSRCC) in Goochland, VA. Though only five miles from my Powhatan location, the horticulture department has greenhouse growing space and an adjacent public display garden. Bed space was made available to me to install a reblooming bearded iris demonstration planting. I picked the most reliable tall bearded and median remountants from previous results obtained at my garden and around AIS Region 4 (West Vir-



JSRCC Reblooming Iris Display Bed

ginia, North Carolina, Virginia and Maryland). Fifty-two varieties were planted.

Leaf compost was rototilled by the college staff into existing clay soil in each half circle bed. Clumps were established from two quart pots. Coarse builder's sand, greens grade pelletized calcitic lime and various organic fertilizer amendments were blended into the soil backfill around each potted plant. Some tall bearded selections had two clumps to enhance the overall presentation. Median varieties were arranged in a single row in a bed facing the tall bearded planting. Establishment took place during June 2011. Some developing rebloom stalks began appearing in late December and early January.

Winter temperatures in 2012 were abnormally mild and spring came early. Bloom sequences for all flowering perennials, shrubs and trees were easily three weeks ahead of schedule. Standard dwarf bearded (SDB) remountants were in flower in late March and the tall (TB) quickly followed in early April. Could a devastating late spring freeze similar to one occurring in 2007 derail bloom and cross pollinations? The cold did come, but my iris plantings somehow escaped serious damage.

Spring bloom was over in early May. Night temperatures however remained mild throughout the month. Three distinct periods with daily readings below 60° F were recorded at Richmond's Byrd Airport. June saw similar se-



Gate Of Heaven TB
(L. Zurbrigg 2004)

Photo Credits page 26:
 Mike Locketell, *L. Rose*
 Display Bed, *L. Rose*
 Gate Of Heaven, *C. Buchheim*
 Renown, *C. Buchheim*
 Northward Ho, *R. Probst*



Northward Ho TB
(L. Zurbrigg 1991)



Renown TB *(L. Zurbrigg 1992)*



Again And Again TB
(S. Innerst 1999)



Just Call Me TB
(B. Wilkerson 2008)



Lunar Whitewash TB
(S. Innerst 2003)



Echo Location TB
(B. Wilkerson 2007)



Over And Over TB
(S. Innerst 2001)



Baby Blessed SDB
(L. Zurbrigg 1979)



Double Dare BB
(M. Lockatell R-2009)



Senorita Frog SDB
(D. Spoon 2002)



I'll Be Back IB
(J.T. Aitken 2004)



Lady Emma MTB
(F. Jones 1986)

quences below the trigger point. If we assume Goochland, VA is five degrees cooler, the stage was now set for an ongoing color parade. Eight tall bearded and four median selections saw late May bloom after a two-week break. By June's end, twenty-five tall and seventeen median varieties were showing off their floral prowess. Wow!

Even though there were no days below the temperature trigger point in July, rebloom continued in earnest.

A phenomenal ten medians out of seventeen were flowering in the summer heat. Likewise, nineteen tall bearded recorded bloomstalks during the period. One possible explanation was accidental daily overhead watering. Moisture and fertility drove continuous increase. After returning from a trip to AIS Region 17 in early August, the party was hardly over. Rebloom continued uninterrupted until hard frosts destroyed most flowers and bloomstalks in early November.

The JSRCC display beds eclipsed all previous rebloom longevity records for me. Spring type bloom back in fall 2004 was encountered on Gate of Heaven TB (L. Zurbrigg, 2004), Northward Ho TB (L. Zurbrigg, 1991), Renown TB (L. Zurbrigg, 1992), Rosalie Figge TB (J. McKnew, 1993) and Unchained Melody TB (C. Mahan, 1999). These same varieties would sparkle in 2012 too.

Daily watering definitely improved late spring and early summer rebloom results at JSRCC. The downside was bacterial soft rot

outbreaks particularly during heavy humidity stretches in late summer. A restrained watering strategy should help resolve this problem. A smaller planting at the Williamsburg Botanical Garden in James City County, VA relied on nature's bounty concerning soil moisture there. Warmer temperatures also affected results, but some of the same JSRCC selections had summer rebloom at WBG.



Rosalie Figge TB (J. McKnew 1993)

Landscape industry instructors at JSRCC were impressed with season long flowering. Real time experience is rebloom's best advertisement. It fulfilled a major goal for the planting. Another aim was identifying the best candidates for rebloom breeding. Again And Again TB (S. Innerst, 1999), Echo Location TB (B. Wilkerson, 2007), Just Call Me TB (B. Wilkerson, 2008), Lunar Whitewash TB (S. Innerst, 2003) and Over And Over TB (S. Innerst, 2001) were top notch season-long Tall Bearded performers. Standouts in the Median classes were Baby Blessed SDB (L. Zurbrigg, 1979), Double Dare BB (M. Lockatell, R-2009), I'll Be Back IB (J.T. Aitken, 2004), Lady Emma MTB (F. Jones, 1986) and Senorita Frog SDB (D. Spoon, 2002).

Based on JSRCC results for 2012, Innerst and Wilkerson selections may help breeders to get closer to reliable summer rebloom. Directions appear to be endless. If seedlings influenced by these cultivars can flower again in summer without significant night temperature and soil moisture triggers, reblooming bearded irises will enjoy greater acceptance and popularity. It is just a matter of time.



JSRCC Display bed with clumps of Median iris.

Photo Credits page 27:
Again And Again, C. Buchheim
Just Call Me, R. Probst
Lunar Whitewash, C. Buchheim
Echo Location, R. Shadlow
Over And Over, C. Buchheim
Baby Blessed, C. Buchheim
Double Dare, C. Buchheim
Senorita Frog, G. Spoon
I'll Be Back, J.T. Aitken
Lady Emma, C. Chapman
Display Bed, L. Rose
Rosalie Figge, J.T. Aitken