

# Houston Gardener Plants Passion for Louisiana Irises

by Kathy Huber\*

To the photographer's astonishment, Josephine Shanks pulls the crested iris from a shady flowerbed. "Everybody who goes to a garden has to leave with something," she laughs, handing him the cherished rhizomes.

Continuing the morning walk through her garden, she passes the photographer a pot of fall-flowering firespike and a fistful of Australian violets, and snaps a branch from an angel's trumpet, before packing him off with a last-minute clump of dietes, an iris relative, yanked bare-handed from a bed near his car.

This is a gardener's garden, she tells him. There's a bit of this and that—but at its heart are Shanks' irises. And first and foremost, Louisiana irises.

In 1977, it took just one look at the stand of spring-flowering Louisiana irises in friend Lydia Hilliard's garden to convince Shanks, who worked the iris booth at the Garden Club of Houston's Annual Bulb & Plant Mart, the club should order the curious rhizomes.

The first 50 [rhizomes] arrived in 1978 on a Greyhound bus from Lafayette. The Louisiana iris rhizomes, marked only by color of the blooms to come, sold immediately to gardeners eager to try something new.

Twenty-five years later, thousands of Louisiana irises have just arrived in Houston for next week's mart. The demand for the big order, reportedly the largest selection of Louisiana irises offered at any

U.S. market, is much Shanks' doing. Since her first encounter with the stately iris, she has enthusiastically devoted her time to promoting it nationwide.

Four prestigious medals—two from the Garden Club of America, and one each from the Society for Louisiana Irises and the American Horticulture Society—recognize her horticultural achievements, and honor her contributions in spreading the word and helping increase availability of the water-loving native American iris, found in the greatest concentrations in Louisiana.

Over the years, Shanks, mother of four grown children, has donated Louisiana irises to the Houston Zoo, Mercer Arboretum and Botanic Gardens, Brooklyn Botanic Gardens and the New York Botanical Garden.

Two Louisiana irises carry her name. 'Josephine Shanks,' developed by an Australian grower [John Taylor], is beautiful. "It's pink and has a halo," Shanks says, "which I don't have." 'Empress Josephine,' developed by a friend in Lafayette [Dorman Haymon], is a deep imperial purple.

Distinguished honors and horticultural knowledge aside, it is Shanks' spunky sense of humor and gracious generosity that help win people over to the world of plants. "Josephine is so much fun to work with," says GCH member Delby Willingham who's worked alongside Shanks at the bulb mart for six years.

"People start asking her questions, and she gives everybody the same attention. Every one of these plants is her baby. She makes you want to take them home, plant them and nurture them."

And there are plenty to take home. "We try to keep it around 100 Louisiana iris varieties," Shanks says. "In about 10 different colors—white, yellow, pink, red, lavender, blue, blue-purple, red-purple, bronze and bi-color."

Shanks remembers visits to the bulb mart as a child accompanied by her mother. "I remember lady gardeners there, selling bulbs dug out of their garden," she says. That tradition is a role Shanks gladly fills today. "I'm a market gardener. I grow for the mart," Shanks says. "Different people involved in the mart grow things for it."

"We're not trying to compete with the nurseries, but we're trying to bring old things such as the crinum and new things to Houston gardeners. We're always looking for new things. But we try not to offer anything we've not tried out."

"All the irises are easy here except for the bearded," she says. These do well in the country. Fifty miles from Houston, 100 miles from the sea, they grow like weeds.

Among the easy, naturalizing evergreens is a favorite, the crested iris "Nada"—which Shanks shared with the photographer. "It not only grows under trees, but it also blooms," she says.

\*For many years Josephine Shanks of Houston, Texas has been a stalwart promoter of Louisiana irises as a worthy garden plant. She has served on the Society for Louisiana Irises board and on various Society committees. One of her major efforts on behalf of our favorite iris is to acquire and sell Louisiana irises at the "Annual Bulb & Plant Mart" sponsored by the Garden Club of Houston.

Josephine's efforts have been recognized recently by *The Houston Chronicle* newspaper in an article written by Garden Editor Kathy Huber. We reprint the article herein, with the permission of the newspaper.

# Why Dallas?

by Marie Caillet\*

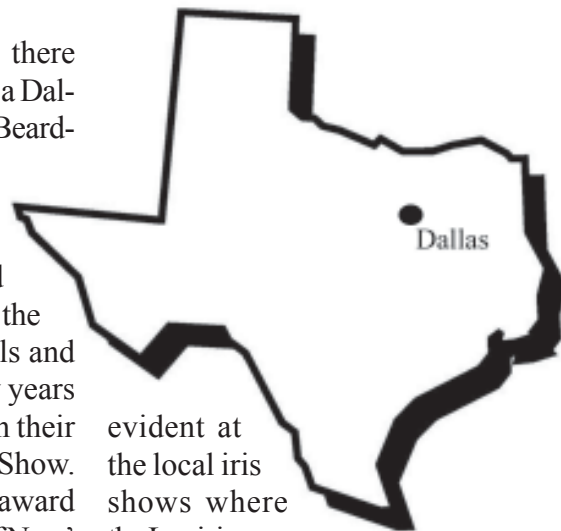
Why is the annual meeting of the Society for Louisiana Irises being held in Dallas? Although no more far-fetched than holding one in Arizona in 2005, it might need some explaining. There are no native stands of irises in North Texas, no well known Louisiana iris hybridizers, and no large gardens featuring Louisiana irises; however, Dallas is centrally located, it has an active iris group, and perhaps it is just a good place to hold conventions!

Our long time member, Minnie Colquitt, always says, "It is good to know where you are going, but just as important to know where you have been." This saying certainly applies to the Dallas and Ft. Worth growers of Louisiana irises. Most knew little about these irises and very few grew them thirty years ago. One of our first growers was Dr. Denman in Ft. Worth, who joined SLI and began growing a few Louisiana irises in the 1960s. Gene and Shirlene Holt of Euless (located between Dallas and Ft. Worth) joined SLI, came to the conventions in Lafayette during the 1980s, and began showing their Louisianas at the Ft. Worth shows. Leon and Edith Wolford of Dallas became interested enough to plant several rows of Louisiana irises for commercial sales. The Ft. Worth Iris Society was brave enough in 1974 to invite Charlie Army to speak and show slides on Louisianas at one of their meetings.

You have probably read or heard me tell these stories before, but they are good examples of where we were 25

or 30 years ago. About 1973 there were four Louisianas entered in a Dallas iris show in a class labeled "Beardless," which included all irises that were not bearded. All four received ribbons in the judging, even though only one was labeled with the correct name! Neither the exhibitor nor the show officials and judges caught the error. A few years later the Louisianas were given their own class at the Ft. Worth Iris Show. One year the "best Louisiana" award was given to an iris labeled 'Isle of Nun.' Of course, the iris was actually Army's lovely white, 'Ila Nunn!' Again, the exhibitor misnamed it, and neither the show officials nor judges recognized the error.

What has been happening since these early years? Today many more people grow Louisiana irises in North Texas, publicity on them has been good, and the passalong system has been actively spreading Louisiana cultivars throughout the area. Only a few nurseries have them to sell by name, but many sell them as unidentified specimens to contract landscapers. One can now find Louisianas at local iris society plant sales. When the Wolfords moved to a farm, they began growing in quantity. They supplied as many as 2,000 named cultivars to the Garden Club of Houston's annual "Plant Mart." Many of us from the Society helped at those sales. Many Texas people joined SLI and began attending the annual meetings. And, certainly the progress was



evident at the local iris shows where the Louisianas were now taking a prominent place. They are still a novelty to many people who attend iris shows, and one often hears questions about these native American irises. Having admired Louisiana irises at the annual show, visitors often come to the local autumn rhizome sales seeking Louisianas.

This progress has also resulted in a better effort to train American Iris Society judges in Texas to properly evaluate Louisiana irises, especially in show judging. There are over 15 iris societies in Texas, and some hold both early and late shows, so the judges in the state get a good workout during bloom season. There will still be mistakes, but the judges are no longer prejudiced. A Louisiana often wins Queen of Show and many win over bearded irises in the color classes. I have won Queen with a Louisiana iris four or five times since moving to this area.

The iris shows in Dallas now have up to 60 or more entries of Louisiana

\*Marie Caillet is a charter member of the Society for Louisiana Irises. Her garden will be on the SLI Garden Tour in 2004. She lives north of Dallas in Little Elm, Texas.

irises, usually coming from a number of exhibitors. Most entries will be fairly new introductions from many different hybridizers. Some growers in the area have as many as 150 to 200 cultivars to select from. A few have begun hybridizing and entering their seedlings in shows. Before poor health took his attention, Farron Campbell had about four acres of Louisiana irises, including his own seedlings. Hooker Nichols, chairman of the SLI convention in Dallas and a long time hybridizer of bearded irises, has over 200 cultivars of Louisianas and is now hybridizing them.

Louisiana iris rhizomes at fall sales in Dallas sell rapidly, both those we label and those sold unlabeled for landscape use. They are especially popular with people who have lakes and ponds. I often get calls from landscapers about sources for buying Louisiana irises in bulk. A few nurseries do sell them in pots for landscape use. The City of Dallas recently put a planting in one of the city parks. The Garden Center at the State Fair grounds has added some new Louisianas to their planting behind the building. My garden, with almost all Louisianas, is toured by many gardening groups each spring.

Garden clubs and horticulture societies often request SLI members and leaders to give slide shows on Louisiana irises. It is hard to turn people down, but I am at an age where I can no longer "promote!" The younger iris growers are having to take over, which they are



The annual Dallas Iris show features an ever-growing number of Louisiana iris entries.

Photo courtesy of Marie Caillet

doing. As you will see when you come to Dallas for the convention, my garden has declined in both the number of plants and the quality of their culture. But, it has served the purpose of helping to promote and to spread the interest of Louisiana irises.

Because of a conflict with the AIS convention dates next year, it has been necessary to reschedule the SLI convention away from our normal weekend format. The Dallas convention will open on Sunday, April 25<sup>th</sup>, and go to Tuesday, April 27, which, depending on the weather, should hit the peak bloom period of our area. A meeting in Dallas will not be like those in South Louisiana, but perhaps we are finally making a dent in the "Tall Bearded Country" of North Texas. And, like the recent conventions in Arkansas, holding the meetings here should increase local interest and perhaps gain a few new members for the Society.

## Attention Iris Photographers! We Need Your Photos

The Society is working to develop a good database of images of Louisiana iris cultivars. Our ultimate goal is to augment our computerized checklist by including pictures of the various registered cultivars.

You can help with this project by sending us any of the following: 1) Digital images (with a resolution of 300 dpi if possible); 2) Color photographic prints; 3) Color slides. SLI will convert all prints and slides into digital images and return the originals to the owners. Please be sure to label all submissions as to the name of the cultivar as well as the owner's name.

Additionally, we are searching for good images of Louisiana irises in landscaped settings.

Please send all submissions to Tom W. Dillard, 12 Normandy Rd., Little Rock, AR 72207, USA; or email [tomd@cals.lib.ar.us](mailto:tomd@cals.lib.ar.us).

## Memorial Gifts

The Society for Louisiana Irises urges all members and supporters to consider giving memorial gifts in honor of deceased members or people otherwise associated with SLI.

Recently, two memorials have been received in memory of Marie Caillet's sister, Shirley Welch, who passed away this spring as she neared one hundred years of age. She had lived across from Marie, had a garden of tall bearded irises, and enjoyed visitors. The award winning Louisiana iris, 'Aunt Shirley,' was named for this lovely lady.

Contact Richard Sloan, 118 East Walnut, Alma, AR 72921 for more information on memorials.