

Oh, Iris Where Art Thou? The Search for ‘Cajun Sunset’

by Robert Treadway*

The 2003 Mary Swords DeBaillon Medal has been awarded to ‘Cajun Sunset’ hybridized by the late Marvin Granger (R. 1990). An accomplished hybridizer and collector, Marvin produced many beautiful creations worthy of the award. He had previously won the DeBaillon for ‘Kay Nelson’ (R. 1986) in 1995. Marvin won numerous Honorable Mentions, Awards of Merit, and the coveted American Iris Society Hybridizer’s Medal in 2001. Unfortunately, it looks like this small yellow iris he created and named ‘Cajun Sunset’ might turn out to be what he is best remembered for. This is not because that it is his most beautiful creation, but because of the fact that it seems to have faded from existence long before it won the award.

This short yellow iris, registered at 15 inches, has unleashed a powerful uproar through the Louisiana iris community. I was quite shocked when I saw the 2003 winners of the American Iris Society Awards. I quickly checked to see which iris won the Dykes Medal (knowing that ‘Cajun Sunrise’ (Mertzweiller 92), which won the DeBaillon in 2000 and thus was eligible for the Dykes; it didn’t win). The next thing I looked for was the recipient of the DeBaillon Medal and was SHOCKED when I saw that an unknown iris, ‘Cajun Sunset,’ had won the award. The other eligibles, ‘Geisha Eyes’ (Army 87), ‘Aunt Shirley’ (Mertzweiller 90), ‘Kentucky Cajun’ (Norris 94), ‘Professor Marta Marie’

(Mertzweiller 90), and ‘Professor Fritchie’ (Mertzweiller 93) are certainly more widely grown and distributed. All of them are still quite readily obtainable in commerce, and all of them may be growing in judge’s gardens around the country. How could I have missed getting this iris named ‘Cajun Sunset’? Did everyone?

A posting on the Louisiana iris discussion group on the Internet brought back referrals to ‘Cajun Sunrise’. Seeing the name in print or even hearing the name spoken seems to keep people confused. ‘Cajun Sunset’ is a short yellow. ‘Cajun Sunrise’ is a taller plant and colored a brick reddish brown with a yellow halo. They look nothing alike, but apparently the names are close enough to keep people confused. We can all tell the difference when we see or hear the words *sunrise* and *sunset* but uttering either with the word Cajun in front of it brings visions of the beautiful flower created by Joe Mertzweiller. ‘Cajun Sunrise’ won the DeBaillon in 2000 with 72 votes and is not eligible to win it more than once.

A call to Marie Caillet and some others brought little more than chuckles. Everyone had to look in the *Registrations and Introductions* published by the American Iris Society or the *Society for Louisiana Irises Checklist* to familiarize themselves with this iris. Albert “Bobo” Faggard, a commercial grower and hybridizer in Beaumont, Texas, listed ‘Cajun Sunset’ for sale in his 1994 catalog, but his memory is that

SLI Withholds 2003 DeBaillon Medal

The Society for Louisiana Irises has decided not to award the DeBaillon Medal for 2003. The decision was made because of a belief among SLI officers and board members that this year’s balloting resulted from an error. While American Iris Society accredited judges select the DeBaillon recipient, SLI actually awards the Medal. This is not the first time SLI has decided not to award the Medal. It was not awarded in 1978 due to a tie vote.

he did not sell very many plants if any. If so, I don’t know who bought them and where they are today. Bobo did take a slide of the iris (out-of-focus) which is printed in this *SLI Newsletter* and the *Bulletin of the American Iris Society*. The slide of the iris and the fact that a few people (and I mean *very few*) have seen it does document that it did exist. But the question remains, was it widely enough grown for 50 AIS Judges to have seen it growing in gardens, fully evaluate it, and award it this most prestigious medal? If these two irises were grown side by side or exhibited together, obviously there would be no mixing them up, but writing the names down or uttering them out loud seems to generate much confusion.

For those unfamiliar with the American Iris Society’s awards process, I

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offer the following simplified version of how it works. *The Handbook for Judges and Show Officials*, published by the American Iris Society, details how the process works and acts as a training guide for the judges. Voting is an opportunity for accredited judges who have undergone training to vote on irises based specifically on garden performance. Just seeing a photograph, slide, a stalk in an exhibition, or knowing the hybridizer is not enough to warrant a vote for an iris. The judge must observe the iris growing in the garden and should vote for the cultivar with the best bud count, placement, and superior performance of both blooms and the overall plant. The evaluations of the cultivars ideally should occur after more than one observation and preferably during more than one bloom season.

Every iris that is officially registered and introduced in the United States or Canada is placed on *The American Iris Society Official Ballot*. Bearded irises are placed there two years after introduction, but Louisiana irises and other beardless irises must wait three years. An iris first becomes eligible for the Honorable Mention (HM); if it wins a HM it advances to the Award Of Merit (AM) level the second year after winning the HM. In turn, if an iris wins the

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'Cajun Sunset,' at the center of controversy
Photo courtesy of Albert "Bobo" Faggard

AM, it will become eligible for the DeBaillon Medal the second year after winning the AM. After winning the DeBaillon it becomes eligible for the Dykes Medal the next year. If an iris fails to win an award after being on the ballot for three years, it is removed from the ballot.

'Cajun Sunset' managed to make its way up this award ladder and gather enough votes to win the DeBaillon. It was registered in 1990 and introduced through Albert C. Faggard in 1994. It went on the ballot and became eligible for the HM in 1997. It won the HM that year with 21 votes and became eligible for the AM in 1999. It won the AM in 2001 with 40 votes and advanced to the DeBaillon level in 2003. It won the DeBaillon this year (2003) with 50 votes.

When we look at the AIS Awards process it becomes even harder to understand how this iris won these three different awards. The results of the AIS balloting is listed in the October *Bulletin of the American Iris Society* each year. The *SLI Newsletter* posts the Louisiana Iris winners. Why wouldn't someone notice it making its way through the awards if no one was grow-

ing it? Marvin Granger was alive when it got the HM and the AM. Maybe he was unaware that this iris was not growing in people's gardens. It seems that people who go to conventions and look at catalogs would realize that something was amiss. Here was an iris winning awards that no one could get to see and could not purchase on the market. For whatever reason, it went unnoticed until it won the highest award any Louisiana Iris has ever won, the DeBaillon.

Perhaps, 'Cajun Sunset' could have somehow gotten spread around the country outside the South where many Louisiana Irises are grown. Maybe it made its way to the West Coast where it has spread and it is now growing in gardens there. If it is still in Louisiana it is growing in someone's garden that neither I nor others can find. I have exhausted my resources in the hopes of finding it. The simple fact is that this iris was never widely grown and is more than likely vanished from the face of the earth. If anyone is still growing it I am sure some nursery would love to acquire it so it can be propagated and sold to the public. It would be nice to grow it and see if it lives up to the reputation most of the DeBaillon Medal winners

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have as being good garden irises.

Please don’t get the impression that I would take anything away from Marvin Granger. He brought some wonderful things into the Louisiana Iris lines by both his collecting and hybridizing. For that we should be eternally grateful. If ‘Cajun Sunset’ doesn’t exist we will have to let our memory of Marvin and all the things he created stand in for the missing iris. When I see a large clump of his beautiful ‘Starlite Starbrite’ (R. 85) bloom or one of his fascinating doubles, I will just have to let them fill in the slot where the DeBaillon winner should be growing. Unfortunately I didn’t get to know Marvin Granger, but I am proud to say that I have gotten to know many of his irises. Maybe this mishap will start us looking at all his other creations that did not get the notoriety ‘Cajun Sunset’ has received. It is too bad many of them will never travel the path to win the DeBaillon or other AIS Awards.

Names are obviously important. It is the tag by which we refer to a plant or a bloom and it advertises that plant to the world. The name sticks in our minds perhaps longer than the bloom. I become familiar with the names of the irises in my garden just by walking by them all through the year and working around them. The names are not just important during the all too short bloom season. I guess hybridizers should take into account human nature when they put names on their creations. We might never confuse the color red for yellow

but the words *sunrise* and *sunset* might be a different story.

‘Acadian Sunset’ (Goula 92) had appeared on a previous ballot with ‘Cajun Sunset’ and might have added to the confusion. The mention of “sunset” might also bring ‘Bayou Sunset’ (Macmillan 45) to mind, an early winner of the DeBaillon Award. ‘Ginger Fudge’ (Pryor 97) and ‘Ginger Punch’ (Morgan 97), which have appeared next to each other on the ballot, would be easy to confuse in voting. The word “Cajun” has been used with numerous other cultivar names through the years, and that might have caused judges to vote for the wrong thing. We, the general iris growing public and AIS judges, should certainly make it a point to distinguish between irises and their names—however similar they might be. It is hard for us to clear our minds from year to year as new names and irises are offered to the public. This might have been the biggest mix-up in the AIS awards system with regard to a Louisiana Iris, but I am sure there will be others along the way for we are all human and as such do make mistakes.

I started this simple journey merely trying to get a rhizome of ‘Cajun Sunset’ to grow in my garden. After not finding it in any catalogs and striking out at every turn, I offer these findings to each of you. I have bothered many people in the search, and for all their assistance, I am grateful. This is the information on ‘Cajun Sunset’ that I have been able to assemble. If anyone is growing it, the iris world would certainly like to hear from you. Perhaps some of Marvin’s close friends or family might someday be able to supply the missing plant. Maybe this entire line of thought is incorrect, but unfortunately I see no other solution to the mystery of this little yellow iris know as ‘Cajun Sunset.’

Thanks go out to Marvin’s family and friends. I assume he would be amused by all the fuss his creation has caused. Who knows, there are still

some of Marvin Granger’s irises that have yet to be introduced. If they are ever introduced into commerce ‘Cajun Sunset’ might not be his last award winner. Any additional thoughts and information on this iris, its existence, or how it won these awards, will be greatly welcomed. Please send any information to the editor of the *SLI Newsletter*.

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