

# Blooms Down Under: My Iris Experience in Australia

By Harry Wolford\*

Beautiful Perth, Western Australia, was the site of the 2003 Iris Society of Australia Convention hosted by the Western Australia Iris Society. And we were going!!

When talking with Heather and Bernard Pryor about possible dates for our visit to Australia, we mentioned that we would like to spend the month of October “down under” since that was the height of their bloom season. Heather assured us that this date would be fine, but that she had planned to attend the Iris Society of Australia [ISA] convention in Perth. She informed us that she would be happy to forgo the convention in 2003 since we would be in Sydney. We had a better idea...we (my wife, Donna, and I) would attend the ISA Convention with her. So Heather generously made the arrangements and everyone was happy!

At 8:30 a.m. on October 24, a week before we were to leave Australia for home, Heather, Ann Hordern (the woman, not the iris), Donna, and I took a Qantas flight from Sydney to beautiful Perth.

Since Ann had grown up in Perth, she agreed to give us a tour of the city. Heather had made arrangements for a rental car, so off we went as soon as we arrived in Perth for a tour that no professional guide could begin to equal.

While we were there for an iris convention, something struck us immediately. Perth has to be the rose capital of



Perth, Western Australia, is beautifully sited on both the Swan River and the Indian Ocean.

Photo by Harry Wolford

Australia, or for that matter, the world. Every color and species of roses could be seen on every street. The quality and quantity would be the envy of Jackson and Perkins.

Ann showed us the various points of interest around the city and was able to take us to different vantage points which gave us outstanding panoramic views of the city. Only a “local” could provide tourists with this advantage.

We concluded our afternoon tour with a trip to the beach and a drive along the Indian Ocean on our way to the Perth Ambassador Hotel.

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We were greeted in the lobby by Jo Tunney, Convention Organizer. If first impressions mean anything, it was evident that “iris people” are the same....world over. Jo had that friendly, “homey” air that one would expect to find at an iris convention in Lafayette, La. or Mansfield, Ohio! This observation was reinforced throughout the next several days....over and over again.

### The Gardens

The ISA Convention actually ran for a period from Monday, October 20 until Sunday, October 26. We obviously missed many interesting activities. However, the bus tour on Saturday the 25<sup>th</sup> was well worth the price of the ticket! While we were to see many different varieties of irises (tall bearded, spurias, arilbreds and Pacific coast) it was quite evident that the Louisiana irises were the real heavyweights in this part of the world.

Our first stop was at **Edenside**, the garden of Clive and Heather Tait in the Bickley Valley. Being a native of West Virginia, I know a good “hillside” when I see one, and this garden was on a good hillside! Clive and Heather bought the 20 acre property in 1973. At that time, it contained approximately 1,000 fruit trees. The small garden was limited to an area around the original house. Since Clive was working full time in Perth, he found it necessary to reduce the number of fruit trees to approximately 250. The Edenside garden is now 1-1/2 acres. Although the garden has a beautiful collection of irises (tall bearded, Louisiana, spurias and Pacific coast), there are many other interesting plants such as roses (Heather’s love) hibiscus, cannas, agapanthus and



Don and Marge Grieves’ garden is full of irises.

Photo by Harry Wolford

lavender.

**Roseworthy Garden**, also in the Bickley Valley, is one of those “picture book” gardens that we read about in *Better Homes and Gardens*. Irises were not featured in this garden, but oh the roses! Bourbons, Damasks, Old Teas, Hybrid Perpetual, Hybrid Musks, Ramblers, species, and many of the modern roses definitely felt at home here. The gently sloping garden contains many “rooms” scattered along winding paths build along the creek that flows through the property. Height has been gained by growing roses into trees and using pergolas. They are complimented by hydrangeas, daisies, geraniums and many other herbs and bulbs. A protective canopy of trees, citrus and large shrubs such as camellias makes for a cool, inviting atmosphere. This is truly a little piece of heaven.

**Don and Marge Grieves** operated the Cut Flower Farm for 20 years. Upon retirement, they purchased the one acre property (Don pointed out that the availability of water and good soil, not the house was the primary consideration) and began planning their next 20 years! Immediately they removed trees from the center of the property and built a pond, which wild ducks now think they own. Don indicated that at the age when most people their age was reducing the size of their property, he and Marge still needed a large garden in which to play and satisfy their floricultural passion. And satisfy that passion they do! There was no doubt when entering this garden that Don and Marge are iris lovers. The collection consisted of tall bearded, spurias and Pacific coast, but it was obvious that Louisiana irises are taken seriously here. Looking especially great was Heather Pyror’s ‘Ann Hordern’ (R. 97) showing off for its name-sake.

Grieves’ seedlings were exceedingly interesting. One,



‘Ann Hordern’

Photo by Harry Wolford



Don Grieves' boldly splotted seedling.  
Photo by Harry Wolford



The Tunny Garden was a showcase of color.  
Photo by Harry Wolford

especially, caught my eye—an iris of “species” form and color of the yellow *I. nelsonii*, but with deep burgundy veining and “splotching.” Since I’m very fond of this form, I asked Don if he had plans to register the iris. I didn’t get a commitment and I was told later that Don didn’t feel he had any seedlings that merited registration/introduction. Hopefully, he will reconsider and we will see his irises in the near future. It definitely represents work that should be available to iris lovers everywhere!

We were back on the bus and off to Lesmurdie for lunch at **Jo and Mort Tunny’s garden**. It was obvious from the first peek at this garden that it would be difficult to keep one’s mind on food!! Jo and Mort started this beautifully terraced garden after moving to the property in 1998. Mort stated that when they moved into the house, the back yard was thick with “prickly bushes, small gum trees and other useless scrub.” Not so now!! The garden contains countless varieties of flowers and shrubs, including a variety of irises. But once again, in my opinion, the Louisiana irises are king here also. John Taylor’s ‘Betty Blockbuster’ (R. 94) and his ‘Sweet Cosette’ (R. 97) caught my eye. In addition to their own collection, Jo and Mort also host the Regional Trial Garden for Louisianas and the planting contains seedlings from hybridizers from across Australia.

I’m convinced that Aussie’s take both their gardening and food very seriously! Our next stop at the Carmel Valley to visit **Melville’s Rose Nursery** reinforced my observation. Here on a hillside surrounded by forest is the state’s largest collection of roses. But in addition, there is the wonderful Rose Heritage Tearoom which offers delicious food, Devonshire teas, coffee, and fresh cake. The view from the tearoom looks down on the picture-postcard gardens, cov-

ered platforms surrounding a natural lake, delightful gazebos among the roses, and rose covered trellises everywhere! This nursery also supports a test garden for irises, but the overwhelming feature is the roses. Once again it became apparent just how suitable the Western Australia climate is for growing roses. We left all of this sorry we were not permitted to transport plants out of the country.

During the convention, I had the honor of being asked to participate on a panel composed of Stephanie Boot, New Zealand, and Cy Bartlett, England. The three of us were asked to discuss what was happening with irises in our countries. I spent my time describing the increasing popularity of the Louisiana iris, the slow realization that this iris does well in much colder climates than we had previously thought, and how this theory is being tested in the Rochester Highland Park garden to which SLI members have generously contributed. Cy Bartlett expressed the opinion that Louisiana irises did not do well in England because of the short, cool summers. He later indicated he would be interested in knowing of any varieties that might respond to such conditions.

Sunday morning activities featured a luncheon cruise down the beautiful Swan River. The river flows into the Indian Ocean and is a wide, scenic body of water. The banks of the river are lined with beautiful homes owned by the very wealthy from Australia and around the world.

Following the cruise, Heather had arranged a special tour for the three of us. While the garden of **Dr. John Betts** had not been on the convention tour, he graciously consented to

give us a personal tour. As we docked from the Swan River cruise, Dr. Betts collected us and it was off to his beautiful home and garden in Thornlie. Upon entering his garden, one is immediately struck by the unique manner in which he grows his Louisiana irises. Rather than placing them in beds, Dr. Betts grows his irises in shallow pots with amazing success. A recognized hybridizer, he showed some of the seedlings he was watching. One he was not sure he would keep was a beautiful blue bi-tone. My notes were a little “sketchy,” but I think the number was 317A. I hope he takes a second look at this iris. I had never had the privilege of seeing John’s irises in a garden and I was happy with my first experience. I had heard of his beautiful ‘Melon Cocktail’ (R. 02) and his ‘Rocket Launch’ (R. 97), but I can tell you that the written descriptions of these irises do not do them justice. And his earlier introduction ‘Leaving Home’ (82) is still a superb iris. (Incidentally I asked him about the significance of the name and he indicated that it was to commemorate the occasion when his daughter went out into the world on her own).

Dr. and Mrs. Betts were wonderful hosts. Once again, we were served coffee, tea and delicious cookies. (During our Australian visit, we were also duly impressed with the cookie industry.) Our visit in the Betts’ home had to end, but it was much too soon.

Back at the hotel in the evening, we enjoyed more great food and the festivities of the evening. A highlight was the presentation of High Commendation Awards and Honourable Mention Awards to Peter Jackson, Heather Pryor and John Betts. Dr. Betts, who was a charter member of the Western Australian Iris Society and served as the foundation president for four years, is the only remaining active member of the pioneer group. He was also presented a life membership by the Society. He and his lovely wife, Pat, will be moving to New South Wales in the very near future.

Our visit to Perth ended the next morning as we boarded our return flight to Sydney. It was a visit with wonderful people growing beautiful flowers and it ended all too soon. The 2005 convention of the Iris Society of Australia will be hosted by the South Australian Iris Society in Adelaide. Donna is already trying to figure out how we can attend that affair.



Dr. John Betts of Perth, stands beside a seedling bed which includes 317A (inset).

Photo by Harry Wolford



Peter Jackson and Heather Pryor were presented with awards at the Iris Society of Australia convention.

Photo by Harry Wolford

