



An Iris Lover: Twenty-five Years on My Knees

BY MARKY SMITH, WASHINGTON

Award-winning hybridizer Marky Smith shares her life with irises and the characters that helped shape her story.

To summarize my twenty five years as a hybridizer—that humble time span ranks me as a “newbie” alongside our Northwest giants like Bennett Jones and the Schreiners, our adoptees Keith Keppel, Terry Aitken, and Paul Black, and all the rest of our great hybridizers. My beginnings were backwards. Many of you know that my great uncle, Melvin Naylor, was a nationally recognized hybridizer back in the dark ages of the 1940s and 50s, and when I was 15, I spent a day in his Utah garden, watching him teach my aunt how to pollinate an iris with a camel’s hair brush. (It was hot, and I was bored.)

Years later, when we moved to our present site on the edge of Yakima, the garden was under constant attack from the critters in the sagebrush which surrounded us. Only the few irises escaped the depredations. So I added more irises, until I had about 30 cultivars. A friend gave me Molly Price's book *The Iris*, and when I read the chapter about hybridizing, I remembered Uncle Melvin and his brush. Being impatient, I forewent the brush, which needed sterilization after each use, and went about brandishing raw anthers. I was astonished to get a huge pod, which required I read the next chapter about planting the seeds. Two years later, those seeds bloomed and, ugly as they were, I was hooked.

I also confess to backing into the median program. Like most people, I started with tall bearded irises, when I still had energy for digging huge clumps and weeding more ground. I learned from Keith Keppel about dominant and recessive traits, about the sheer numbers needed to make a good selection, and about results one might expect from specific parents. From George Shoop, I learned to love tangerine beards and took to heart George's admonition, "Never cross two 'dogs.' All you'll get is puppies!"

But the most valuable advice was given by Bennett Jones, who told me to forget working with TBs and focus instead on medians, where there were myriad colors left unexplored, and not as many folks playing bee. While I was pondering about giving up TBs, we had a winter with six feet of snow—24" inches all winter is more common—and there followed a botrytis plague that decided for me when it carried off about 200 reselect TB seedlings. After the tantrum subsided, I noticed most of the SDB seedlings were unaffected. One feature I love about SDBs is their greater resistance to infection from both soft rot and botrytis, and their positive glee over a cold winter. In a year of -20°F, TB bloom is down 40%, but the "little guys" bloom in great two-year clumps with more intense colors.

My early focus was scattered. I crossed all the "smalls" I could find to learn what colors were dominant, and found there are definite differences when predicting SDB crosses as opposed to those with TBs. In the intermediates, the major effort was to produce enough seed to generate a representative cross-section. It was surprising one could cross two dark purples and get strong yellow, and conversely, breed near-black from yellow and orange as two of the grandparents. I learned to dislike haft markings and have seen enough green-brown and pale yellow seedlings with washy pumila spots and skinny, drab beards to last several lifetimes. It seemed proper to remove plants with bad foliage before

they bloomed, which saved time later rationalizing poor proportions and coarseness. Since I have only a quarter acre of space for seedlings, a sharp shovel is probably my best hybridizing tool.

With two and a half decades of birthdays and waning energy comes narrowed focus for projects, especially in SDBs: better form, more color saturation, and dramatic beards, such as bright red or hot yellow beards on black, or intense pinks with navy blue beards. For 20 years, spring bloom included yellow plicatas, working for form and tangerine beards, which coalesced recently. Colors for intermediates tend to follow the same lines, as the dwarf parents are already available. I have fondness for luminatas in all sizes, especially intense colors with fuzzy pale beards and glowing hearts. My last few generations of medians have included efforts for a near-black plicata on white ground. It progresses with 'Orca' (2009).

The judges of The American Iris Society have been tremendously generous in their response to my Yakima flowers. The Honorable Mentions, the Awards of Merit, and now three Cook-Douglas and three Sass medals continue to warm my fingers and my heart on those cold spring days in the wind. Of course, the greatest thrill, and one I always thought beyond a median hybridizer, was to receive Roy Epperson's phone call that 'Starwoman' (1998) had won the Dykes Medal. I burst into tears.

I want to express my sincere thanks and gratitude to Keith Keppel for the many seedlings, both tall and small, he has shared with me over the years. Without him there would be no 'Starwoman', no 'Delirium' (2001) and no 'Ming' (1998). Similarly, a large number of my varieties reflect gifts from Paul Black, Bennett Jones, and Terry Aitken, who share pollen, a whole flower, end even entire plants, often before they formally introduce them. The great strength of the Northwest hybridizers is this generosity, which in turn expands a gene base which is compatible to all our work.

Each season brings every hybridizer fresh ideas for crosses, some of which were planned carefully over the winter by assessing the relationships of cultivars in inventory. Some are spontaneous, "Wow, what if that blue with the orange ancestor was used with that tangerine beard?" Some are covetous, hatched in other people's seedling patch. And some are simply what was available at the moment. But if I have a list of planned crosses, I can save pollen from the required SDBs in the freezer to make intermediate crosses when the talls begin to bloom. And every year, that space of possibility as the stalks push up out of the plants is the fuel that lights the fire. Try it! You'll be hooked in two years too. ♣