

FROM THE GARDENS AT LAUGHINGSTOCK

By Pat Otterness - Lovington, VA

Eye of the Beholder

I was recently given an opportunity to view online photographs of irises from the past, varieties that were famous in their time. The thing that struck me about most of these varieties was not their beauty. Quite the opposite! How very plain they seemed in comparison to the varieties we celebrate today. Every year I discard hundreds of seedlings more beautiful, more shape-ly, more colorful, than the celebrated innovations of the past.

At the same time, I was reminded that many of the seedlings I most enjoy in my own garden are far from the current rage, by no means suitable by current standards for naming, registering, and introducing. Often a new seedling variety has that *je ne sais quoi* that keeps the eye returning to it: a certain combination of color, pattern, or perhaps just a perceived *joie de vivre* that sets it apart. In vain might I seek traits that would mark it as a candidate for introduction. Falls will invariably be too narrow, or standards will have too little substance, perhaps even droop a bit. Stalks may be too tall or too short; blooms may fail in number or lack a spacing pleasing to the eye. Yet each one of these potential rejects carries some trait I treasure. Usually it is color or pattern that catches my eye ... brings my focus back ... causes me to re-evaluate what my rational mind knows cannot meet the standards of the day.

Most iris enthusiasts never get to see these not-quite-good-enough conundrums. Their choices are limited to catalogs crammed with the newest things, the *crème de la crème* of iris offerings. We who breed, on whatever scale, are more fortunate. While the big growers feel compelled (by sheer numbers) to compost all but the special few best gleanings of their crops, those of us who breed on a smaller scale can allow ourselves to keep and share the beauty of these "lesser" samplings.

Every year, I save varieties that are less than perfect, less than introduceable. I justify it by telling myself they are re-selects. Truthfully, the best are likely to parent future generations hopefully better suited to the current iris vogues. Many of the remaining not-quite-



SEEDLING B-115

beauties will be shared with friends and with strangers. In fact, I expend tremendous energy finding good homes for all of my seedling varieties. Reluctant to discard even the homeliest seedlings, I have been known to sneak down country roads, flinging rhizomes with wild abandon, in the hope that some will survive to gladden the eye of the indiscriminate.



SEEDLING Z-245

Because most folks in my rural county have unsophisticated tastes, I am not alone in celebrating nature's less-than-perfect creations. My neighbors notice mostly color. When confronted with a new, state-of-the-art yellow variety, they will tell me they "already have a yellow one". Forget the ruffles, the lace, the fragrance, the re-blooming, and so on. For them, yellow is yellow. Yet these undiscerning folks are pleased as punch to be given free rhizomes of whatever quality. They exhibit the same innocent enjoyment of my colorful castoffs that a child finds in a shiny pebble or the bright feather of a bird. It is this innocent but genuine delight that fuels my yearly giveaways. The pleasure I see in their faces makes my annual rhizome-sharing a labor of love.

I could fill the pages of this journal many times over with photos of the imperfect lovelies I find myself unable to part with. Space, and the *tolerance of my editor*, dictate a more limited display. Be sure to save these photos, though, so that when the progeny of my iris *also-rans* are Dyke's contenders, you'll be able to examine the parents for clues to breeding success.

Some of my re-selects are quite good, of course. Seedling B-115, child of LET'S BOOGIE x SPINOFF, looks promising for introduction soon. I am especially



SEEDLING B-250

entranced by its standards, which have the luscious look of lightly browned meringue piled invitingly above berry-toned falls.

Seedling Z-245 may qualify for introduction through its color alone. This eye-catching beauty, child of GALA MADRID x STOP THE MUSIC, is the most brilliant cinnamon-red I've seen, deserving a category of its own.

PLANNED TREASURE always seems to produce lovely children, and seedlings B-139 and B-250 are no exception. These sibs, from a cross between SKATING PARTY and PLANNED TREASURE, resemble porcelain sculptures. I am tempted to introduce one or both of these pastel pretties, and I will soon cross the sibs to each other to see what transpires.

A favorite of my *less-than-introduceable* seedlings is A-39. Its bloom never fails to draw my eye and gladden my heart. It has the added *cachet* of being the product of a cross between two of my own introductions, BETTER HALF and LAUGHINGSTOCK. So okay, I *know* nobody has ever heard of BETTER HALF ... and if they've heard of LAUGHINGSTOCK, it could only have been in my *Tall Talk* articles ... but *hey!* I'll bet you've *all* heard of their *parents*. A cross between EDITH WOLFORD and SILVERADO produced BETTER HALF. LAUGHINGSTOCK is the happy child of APHRODISIAC and



SEEDLING B-139



SEEDLING A-39

SILVERADO. You've heard of *those* varieties, I'll bet! My delightful-if-not-so-perfect A-39 is a kind of *royalty* ... a *clown princess* of Dykes ancestry. *Okay?*



SEEDLING A-120

Another favorite, A-120, is the product of crossing COPPER CLASSIC to BRIDE'S HALO. I fell in love with seedling A-120 at first sight, and I have used it extensively in crosses despite a rather glaring defect ... a lack of substance that leaves its falls, though not its standards, rather droopy. But, *oh*, the color! I can only hope its progeny retain the rich rust and gold while amending its other attributes.

An interesting anomaly in my garden is Z-274, unlikely product of a cross between LEMON FEVER and FALL FIESTA. This cross gave me many yellows, a few pinks, and one near-orange, ALMOST AUTUMN, which was one of my 2001 introductions. Z-274, however, uniquely combines true orange with the plicata pattern. Alas, its falls are too narrow, and its standards too open ... but again, sometimes color and pattern override other considerations. This seedling will surely find a place in my future crosses.



I would encourage each of you, even those with limited space, to try your hand at pollination. Germinate a few seeds, just for the fun of it. Grow them in pots, if necessary. A little hands-on experience will help you appreciate, albeit on a small scale, the effort that goes into creating today's magnificent iris varieties. It might even, perchance, force you to commiserate with one old lady who walks in beauty at Laughingstock.

