

A Second Look at the Great Clarence Mystery

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'Clarence'

Photo: Elladan McLeester

THE BEARDED IRIS CLASSES HAVE SEEN INTENSE DEVELOPMENT OVER THE PAST CENTURY. COUNTLESS GENERATIONS OF SEEDLINGS VASTLY IMPROVED FLOWER FORM WITH BRASSY BUBBLE RUFFLES AND DELICATE LACY EDGES. Elusive colors and rich patterning were finally uncovered by persistent breeding. Novelty irises such as space agers and broken colors found favor. Rebloom on the other hand struggled to find disciples and a public voice.

The prevailing landscape changed with an unforeseen story appearing in Martha Stewart Living Magazine in the late nineties. Readers were captivated by the potential of their beloved “flags” blooming in spring and fall! Reliable selections created by Dr. Lloyd Zurbrigg, Earl Hall, Frank Jones, Jane McKnew, Monty Byers, Ben Hager, Sterling Innerst and others finally saw wider distribution and spots on yearly popularity polls. AIS judges began to take notice.

Lloyd Zurbrigg’s breathtaking ‘Clarence’ (Zurbrigg, 1991) became a finalist for the prestigious Dykes Medal. ‘Clarence’ has fragrant flowers with white standards tinted violet on top. Falls are light-blue violet with a distinctive white center and creamy white beards. A consistent fall rebloomer, it was unable to win irisdom’s top award. A nagging sidebar to this popular Virginia-bred remontanant was its unknown heritage. While not a big deal for home gardeners, its mysterious parentage greatly diminished its breeding value.

Dr. Donald Spoon, a fellow AIS Region 4 breeder from Northern Virginia tried to identify its lost lineage in an enlightening article entitled “The Great Clarence

Mystery.” The story first appeared in the 1998 Fall Edition of the *Reblooming Iris Recorder* and reprinted in the April 1999 edition of the *AIS Bulletin*. Don recounted his use of the appealing Zurbrigg rebloomer with various Keith Keppel *luminata plicatas* on a hunch. His instincts paid handsome dividends.

‘Mind Reader’ (Keppel, 1994) proved to be the best partner. According to Spoon, the combination produced “rebloomer-like vigor and bloomstalks up to 38 inches.” Offspring were “various *luminata amoenas* plus one perfect *glaciata* with no purple, blue, maroon or red anthocyanin pigments and faint yellow at the base of the falls.” The best of the lot—‘Daughter of Stars’ (D. Spoon, 2000) — would later suffer the same fate competing for the Dykes Medal as its famous parent.

Daughter of Stars has purple standards with a near-white edge. Falls are deep purple with lighter veins, a thin white edge plus a white area and ray pattern around white beards. A stellar Eastern-bred *luminata plicata*, ‘Daughter of Stars’ has dynamite rebloom tendencies particularly in locales around Region 4. The breeding potential of ‘Mind Reader’ may have been a given, but what exciting traits could ‘Clarence’ express?

The Spoon article was a great benefit to understanding the Zurbrigg rebloomer’s impact on ‘Daughter of Stars’. Don developed some intriguing theories based on test crosses, garden observations and discussions with Dr. Zurbrigg. He felt ‘I Do’ (Zurbrigg, 1974) or its offspring expressed *luminata plicata* genetic traits found in ‘Daughter of Stars’. I believe Don’s conclusion was correct based on recent results of ‘Clarence’ seedlings

in my garden. The likely candidates for one half of the parentage are 'Brother Carl' (Zurbrigg, 1983), an offspring of 'Sister Helen' X 'I Do', or 'Immortality' (Zurbrigg, 1982), a result of the cross of 'I Do' X 'English Cottage'. Breeding records indicate frequent use of both 'I Do' offspring in Zurbrigg rebloom breeding throughout the mid-eighties.

A time line helps us to speculate on the second genetic influence of 'Clarence'. Nita Zurbrigg in recent conversation stated her late husband would evaluate worthy seedlings over a three to four year period prior to their eventual registration and introduction. Health and relocation issues could have interrupted seedling evaluation in the late eighties. Lloyd's masterpiece luckily did not get lost in these distractions. Its initial public appearance played to rave reviews by the late Dr. D.C. Nearpass at the 1990 Chesapeake and Potomac Iris Society Fall Flower Show. Former AIS President Clarence Mahan proudly recalled Nearpass saying, "Never again will anyone be able to say that reblooming irises are lagging behind other irises when it comes to flower form."

If we assume 'Clarence' obtained its rebloom prowess and luminata plicata tendencies from an 'I Do' seedling, perhaps its outstanding flower form came

from an outside source. The release of 'Victoria Falls' (Schreiner's, 1979) found immediate favor in eastern remontan breeding circles. Clarence Mahan remarked, "'Victoria Falls' had a reputation in the rebloom robin and rebloomed in my garden. It was a marvelous plant with nice bud placement and flower form." Zurbrigg breeding records show four successful spring crosses using 'Victoria Falls' in 1980. R56 October and R54-3 offspring would later be mentioned in reselect notes. These last two 'Victoria Falls' hopefuls would surface in the iris marketplace in 1984.

'Sugar Blues' or R56 October (Zurbrigg, 1984) was one of two 'Victoria Falls' seedlings to be registered and released. Wisteria-blue flowers have white beards with tangerine in the throat. The parentage was initially designated as 'Victoria Falls' X unknown. After a few years, "probably 'Summer Holidays'" was scribbled next to the question mark in Lloyd's studbook. Recent research found the seedling numbers were reversed in the registration.

R65 October is currently recorded as 'Sugar Blues' in the AIS Registry. The real R65 (actually R65 Form) came from a cross of 'Sprightly Air' (Schreiner's, 1976) and 'Trumpet Concerto' (Zurbrigg, 1981). This early space-age seedling is in the lineage of Zurbrigg Sdlg. #VV101





LEFT TO RIGHT: 'Daughter of Stars'; 'Brother Carl'; 'Sugar Blues'; 'Gate of Heaven' (Zurbrigg, 2004)

Slate Blue. Lloyd suggested using 'Gate of Heaven' (Zurbrigg, 2004) as a pollen parent with the reblooming VV101 Slate Blue to improve space-age flower form and to test blue expression. The one surviving seedling from this idea is a reblooming blue luminata plicata (Lockatell Sdlg.#20550-1). Initial early November 2009 bloom was a huge surprise.

'Bethany Claire' (Zurbrigg, 1984) was the other 'Victoria Falls' seedling to be released. The parentage is ('Victoria Falls' X ('Sister Helen' x 'Rime Frost')). R54-3 is another wisteria-blue self with a slight white area around white beards on 40" bloomstalks. Like 'Sugar Blues,' beards were tangerine in the throat. A check of the description for 'Rime Frost' gives considerable validity to the influence of 'Bethany Claire' as a potential 'Clarence' parent.

R53-2 ('Victoria Falls' X ('Grand Dame' x 'Summer Holidays')) was later used with 'Brother Carl' in 1984. One of the seedlings, Zurbrigg Sdlg. #V3-2-4 was described in 1986 reselect notes as a "very nice short blue." This important Zurbrigg seedling would again be mentioned in 1987 Spring Garden Notes for color, stalk size and growth. The blue hopeful would figure in six of ten recorded spring 1986 crosses involving 'Victoria Falls' and 'I Do' offspring. 'Bethany Claire' and the use of 'Sugar Blues' seedlings like V3-2-4 was a concerted effort to improve flower form, eliminate haft markings and somehow retain rebloom genetics in Zurbrigg blue lines. One of these combinations likely led to the creation of 'Clarence'.

Don Spoon suggested 'Latest Style' (Zurbrigg, 1979) as another parental choice for 'Clarence'. Only one 'Latest Style' cross with an 'I Do' seedling appears in Lloyd's studbook. V157 was from ('Latest Style' x unknown) X 'Brother Carl'. No offspring were used in future ideas or reviewed in reselect notes. The coloring of 'Latest Style' may have been similar to 'Clarence', but records indicate Lloyd Zurbrigg found more value in using 'Victoria Falls' descendants with 'I Do' children in

future blue rebloom generations.

Three named 'Clarence' children plus two older Zurbrigg seedlings still reside in my Powhatan County, VA garden. Before his death in 2005, Lloyd asked me to try using 'Daughter of Stars' with 'Gate of Heaven'. The resulting offspring were zonals, purple selfs, a purple luminata plicata, one bitone (neglecta) and one high-quality Moorish blue self. Seedlings had big flowers and short stalks or medium flowers on taller stalks. Flower substance and branching were issues. Their fall flowering season occurred from mid-October until our region's first hard frost in early November.

'Gate of Heaven' or PP38 has proven to be a dependable early September rebloomer for me except in very hot and dry summers. Its parentage is 'Clarence' X 'St. Petersburg'. Flared and ruffled medium blue blooms have cream beards with tangerine in the throat. Another older seedling in my display garden is Zurbrigg Sdlg. #PP7 or 'Clarence' X 'Amanda Erin'. Its blue tailored flowers are on short stalks and will sometimes try to flower in late October or early November. Unlike 'Gate of Heaven', PP7 is useful for testing the impact of 'Clarence' as a breeder for elusive apricot-orange rebloomers with tangerine beards.

Another 'Clarence' seedling worth mentioning is Zurbrigg Sdlg. #NN2 or 'Clarence' X 'Matrix'. Interesting pale yellow blooms have the slightest hint of violet upon opening. Flowers are big and blocky with nice ruffling. Bloomstalks however are short with no branching. NN2 faithfully reblooms in early October each year, but despite its amazing coloring, suffers from one of the worst shortfalls of 'I Do'. Lloyd didn't overcome hidden flaws in his rebloom breeding by automatically inserting either 'Victoria Falls' or 'Matrix' virtues into established lines. More innovation was required for future successes.

This past summer resembled Dante's Inferno in central Virginia. The Richmond area broke every record for heat dating back to 1900. Summer night temperatures hovered around 70° F for July and August.



LEFT TO RIGHT: 'Bethany Claire'; Lockatell Sdlg #20517 (Gate of Heaven X Daughter of Stars); Zurbrigg Sdlg. #NN2 (Clarence X Matrix); 'Just Call Me' (Wilkerson, 2008)

Dry conditions further delayed normal fall flowering by close to a month. The big news was 'Gate of Heaven' mated with either Zurbrigg Sdlg. #TT109 or 20360A-L produced surprising maiden seedling bloom in August and September.

Zurbrigg Sdlg. #TT109 has 'Northward Ho' (Zurbrigg, 1991), 'Rock Star' (Byers, 1991), 'Renown' (Zurbrigg, 1992), 'Mesmerizer' (Byers, 1991) and 'English Cottage' (Zurbrigg, 1976) in its heritage. Zurbrigg Sdlg. #20360A-L features 'Pinkness' (Byers, 1989), 'Godsend' (Byers, 1989), 'Renown', 'Sunny Disposition' (Zurbrigg, 1991) and 'Mesmerizer' in the lineage. Weather conditions surely affected bloomstalk height and flower quality. Seedlings have shown good growth habits, so spring bloom may shed more light on their possible value. Summer and or early fall rebloom may well be traced to the buildup of cool and warm season rebloom genetics found in each seedling. My work indicates the 'I Do' factor in 'Clarence' combined with a strong rebloom seedling or named variety may increase the likelihood of late summer or September flowering under any growing condition in the Mid-Atlantic region. Positive future results could finally realize one of Lloyd Zurbrigg's main breeding goals.

'Just Call Me' (Wilkerson, 2008) was another rebloom sensation this past summer and fall in my garden. The year's second flowering sequence commenced on one of three clumps in early August. Fall flowering continued on each one until a hard frost ended the color parade in early November. The combination of 'Love Lines' X 'Clarence' was a match made in heaven. By using 'Love Lines' (Wilkerson, 2006), Betty found the right pairing to obtain high-quality, early fall-flowering, near-amoenae rebloomers. 'Love Lines' parentage is ('Latest Style' X 'Glistening Icicle').

After 'Victoria Falls' was incorporated into Zurbrigg remontant blue lines, the challenge was to capitalize on the Schreiner introduction's coveted modern flower form, sparkling color and warm season rebloom.

'Victoria Falls' would later prove to be a fantastic benefit to succeeding generations of Eastern rebloom development. 'Suky' (Mahan, 1991), 'Renown', 'Again & Again' (Innerst, 1999) and 'Over & Over' (Innerst, 2000) instantly come to mind. Lloyd hedged his bets by using 'Victoria Falls' on both sides of various crosses. The trick was finding a resulting seedling with impeccable flowers and consistent rebloom. In summary, my research suggests a reverse cross of either 'Sugar Blues' offspring or 'Bethany Claire' used with another Zurbrigg seedling containing both 'Victoria Falls' and 'Brother Carl' or 'Immortality' probably created 'Clarence'.

Lloyd did not have the luxury of seeing the majority of second and third generation 'Clarence' offspring to reconstruct its lineage. If he had, I believe he would have been intrigued with my conclusions presented here. The unknown heritage of his best reblooming iris was "a great frustration for Lloyd," Nita Zurbrigg recalls. It robbed him and other rebloom advocates of using 'Clarence' to its fullest potential. Don Spoon and Betty Wilkerson have given us a glimpse to its immense possibilities. Unlike 'Dusky Challenger' (Schreiner's, 1986), "unknown" likely cost Dr. Lloyd Zurbrigg the Dykes Medal. It will be up to future enterprising rebloom pollen daubers to realize the careful planning and genius behind a remarkable iris breeding achievement. The time has come to get out the tweezers and give 'Clarence' a second look as an important remontant breeding parent.

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