

“A BRIDGE IN TIME”

Betty Wilkerson, Cool Season Rebloom Hybridizer

BY MIKE LOCKATELL, VIRGINIA



Wilkerson Garden, fall 2017—rebloomers in garden and pots

The late Betty Wilkerson (1941–2017), from Scottsville, KY, was a “true believer” in growing and breeding cool-season reblooming bearded irises. Despite constant health and garden set-backs in her final years, she NEVER gave up the fight to gain wider acceptance for a remarkable perennial heirloom garden plant. Like my mentor and friend the late Dr. Lloyd Zurbrigg (1925–2005), Betty was resilient in attempting to create reliable cool-season remontants

(zones 4–7) with new colorings and pleasing flower form despite overwhelming discouragement and disinterest on both local and national iris society levels.

According to a recently discovered email from 2007, the Kentucky breeder felt she didn’t know any more about rebloom or iris breeding than anyone else. By doing thorough pedigree research each winter, my fellow cool-weather rebloom breeder had a solid hybridizing game plan going into each spring



'Returning Chameleon'
(Betty Wilkerson 1995, TB-Re)



'Summer Radiance'
(Betty Wilkerson 1996, TB-Re)



'Echo Location'
(Betty Wilkerson 2007, TB-Re)

bloom season. "I read catalogs and wrote to people everywhere, including Ben Hager, Monty Byers, Raymond Smith and Lloyd Zurbrigg," she wrote. During one early reblooming iris robin exchange, Betty was told to use TB-Re 'I Do' (Zurbrigg, 1974) instead of TB-Re 'Immortality' (Zurbrigg, 1982). Lloyd Zurbrigg would later chime in, "You were using the right one if rebloom was your goal." My mentor and friend's sound advice would bring Betty future success.

Betty wrote, "Since I've been growing modern irises, the flower form of northern rebloomers has been a bone of contention. It is still the white elephant in the middle of the room that no one wants to talk about. Did I step on toes without knowing it? Probably so. I was just too dumb and enthusiastic. Warm season rebloom breeders are quite happy with customers they have within their own growing zones. They don't feel the need to hybridize for cool season climates such as Zones 4-7."

Her email commentary went on: "I felt the same weight of opinion with the iris society that Lloyd did. He chose to improve flower form through northern rebloomers. I admired his tenacity. However, it seemed like a very long road to me. My goal was to improve form while retaining rebloom. I really don't think that made him right or me wrong. It just meant we had different approaches. Do I expect first generation rebloom? Not at all, but I'll accept it when

it happens. If I had it to do over again, I'd do a lot of things differently."

My friendship with Betty Wilkerson started with the Triple R Reblooming Robin. After Lloyd Zurbrigg's passing in 2005, we helped each other weather devastating blows in the garden and in our personal

lives. As luck would have it, we never had the great pleasure of meeting each other face-to-face. We had to rely on email and phone calls. My cell phone, for instance, would allow Betty to vicariously walk my garden beds with me at J. Sargeant Reynolds Community College (JSRCC) in Goochland County, VA, to evaluate and interpret spring flowering plus summer and fall rebloom. Even though we took different avenues to the breeding obstacles we faced, Betty and I celebrated triumphs and lamented disappointments. Managing expectations became a necessity.

A mutual trust allowed me the great privilege over the years to trial Wilkerson seedlings and registrations. TB-Re 'Returning Chameleon' (Wilkerson, 1995), 'Summer Radiance' (Wilkerson, 1996), 'Radiant Bliss' (Wilkerson, 2005), 'Echo Location' (Wilkerson, 2007) and 'Just Call Me' (Wilkerson, 2008) instantly come to mind. Each one represented badly needed advances and expanded the gene pool for cool season rebloom.

TB-Re 'Radiant Bliss' is unfortunately a late fall



'Just Call Me'
(Betty Wilkerson 2008, TB-Re)



'Radiant Bliss'
(Betty Wilkerson 2005, TB-Re)



'Summer Honey'
(Betty Wilkerson 2013, TB-Re)



Locketell seedling #21442

rebloomer here under favorable weather conditions, but its unique plicata coloring and stellar flower form confirmed some of Betty's best breeding ideas. Greyed orange standards veined beetroot with falls featuring beetroot over white ground with bright gold overlay leaves a compelling statement in the spring and fall iris garden here. Thanks to outstanding East and West plicata parentages, future seedling populations offer cool season rebloom pollen daubers new directions for colorings and patterns.

Another outstanding Wilkerson tall bearded rebloomer in my Central Virginia garden is TB-Re 'Just Call Me'. Once again, Betty weaved modern flower form and consistent rebloom reliability into one seedling package. As Lloyd Zurbrigg had earlier predicted, 'I Do's' presence through TB-Re 'Brother Carl' (Zurbrigg, 1984) in TB-Re 'Clarence' (Zurbrigg, 1991) was the perfect match to use with Betty's TB 'Love Lines' (Wilkerson, 2006) (or TB-Re Latest Style (Zurbrigg, 1979) X TB Glistening Icicle (Maryott, 1982)). The near blue amoena has proven to be a valuable stepping stone in this author's quest to find reliable tall bearded true amoenas and bicolors. If last fall's results at JSRCC are any indication, progress is finally being made to find these attractive patterns in cool season rebloom. At present, they simply don't exist with modern flower form and early reliability.

Betty Wilkerson made her last TB Re

introductions in 2013. One of them, TB-Re 'Summer Honey' (Wilkerson, 2013) will be her signature rebloomer. This Kentucky-bred variety has impeccable yellow blooms with a honey overlay. Flowers also have nice ruffling and substance. The big news, of course, is summer-flowering recorded over the past three years at JSRCC. The Wilkerson rebloomer has consistently flowered in late June or in July each year under varied weather conditions AND won "Best in Show" at the 2015 Region 4 Fall Flower Show held in Norfolk, VA on a mid-September date. My glowing testimonials in the *RIS Reblooming Iris Recorder* made no difference. The rebloom community merely yawned. Could 'Summer Honey' perform in Zones 4-6? We may never know.



'Star Gate'
(Betty Wilkerson 2005, TB-Re)

The ancestry of 'Summer Honey' is (Radiant Bliss X TB-Re Summer Radiance) or (TB-Re Lemon Reflection (R. G. Smith, 1978) X TB Hindenberg (Maryott, 1983)). Betty and this author tried for years to capitalize on genes in both parents to develop reliable tall bearded pink and orange cool season rebloomers. Lloyd Zurbrigg also mentioned to me, "plicata can be an avenue to pink rebloom." Locketell seedling #21442 or TB-Re (Pink Attraction (E. Hall, 1988) X Summer Honey) bloomed apricot-pink flowers on 10/22 & 11/2/17 at JSRCC. My mentor and friend was proven right yet again.

Betty suffered through horrendous health issues in her last ten years. Long distance travel was impossible after visiting the AIS 2005



Wilkerson seedling #2611 bloom



Wilkerson seedling #1907-10 Re



Wilkerson seedling TB 2019-03

National Convention in St. Louis. Many surgeries occurred, requiring significant physical therapy and recuperation. She would use spring and fall bloom as motivation in her recoveries. Coupled with extreme weather at times, her best seedlings suffered from inevitable neglect. She could only look out the window and hope for the best. Her daughter Sherri and son Chris were able to help her in 2015 and 2016. The garden received a badly needed makeover, and the seedling plantings thrived. Summer and fall flowering in Scottsville was spectacular and brought my close friend lots of joy and hope in 2016. Seedlings from Wilkerson Cross Pollination #2611 stood out. There was a yellow amoena with blue beards. Big blocky flowers had ruffles and substance. Another #2611 seedling bloomed at JSRCC in mid- October. It was an eye catcher too!!

Besides cool season reblooming irises, Betty Wilkerson’s garden also featured daffodil, herbaceous peony and daylily collections. A nice show for everyone to see. Betty was dedicated to her family. Son Chris lived nearby with three daughters. She would help her grandchildren with homework during afterschool visits and enjoyed watching their softball and marching band activities. After her passing, the family took her remains back to her

native Arkansas to be with her departed parents.

My close friend and fellow Eastern rebloom breeder was determined to leave a written record of her hybridizing activities in the public domain to benefit future cool season tall bearded rebloom breeding. Betty’s articles appeared regularly on the AIS Blog and I am told her viewpoints always sparked lively online discussions. Wilkerson kept meticulous records. She was instrumental in getting me to record daily high and low temperature readings in my area. These observations would prove valuable in predicting the size and scope of rebloom in summer and fall. The data also helped me to make better decisions on seedlings and future cross pollination efforts. Her passing has been a major adjustment for me.



Betty Wilkerson

My last telephone conversation with Betty Wilkerson before her death in early April last year ended with this exchange. “Mike, guess we really haven’t made much progress on cool season rebloom have we? I paused for a moment, “I guess you’re right... We’ve known the answer to that one for awhile...” Rest in peace Betty Wilkerson, it was an honor and a privilege to have known you and work on rebloom development with you.



For more information or to obtain a named Betty Wilkerson variety, contact Mike Lockatell: CMarti8855 @verizon.net • (804) 330-2916