

SDB Seedlings Save 2015 Fall Season

BY MIKE LOCKATELL, VIRGINIA

Today's home gardeners and landscape professionals are attracted to reblooming bearded irises. The chance to see flowers twice in the same growing season is appealing. Rebloom for colder climates remains a huge obstacle. The gene pool is still limited. Like a lottery player, success becomes a numbers game. A pollen dauber looking for this recessive trait **MUST** commit to thorough pedigree research, good instincts, perseverance and lots of growing space to find promising seedlings.

Despite some recent claims, progress for reliable cool season rebloom particularly in the tall bearded class has been minimal. Promising seedlings must not only be able to consistently flower again each summer or fall, but hopefuls have to also sport attractive flowers and habits. Possible releases to the marketplace require testing in varied microclimates to prove reliability over many years. Some of the best available reds, purples, and pinks, for instance, were introduced decades ago. With more hybridizers, maybe future fortunes can change.

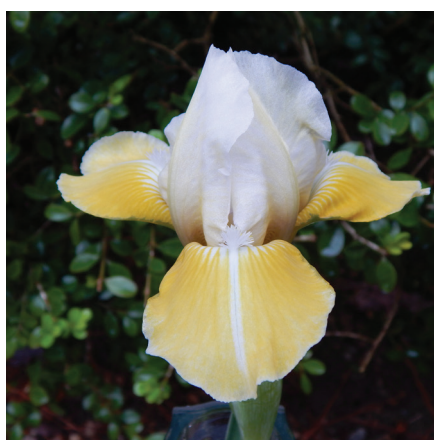
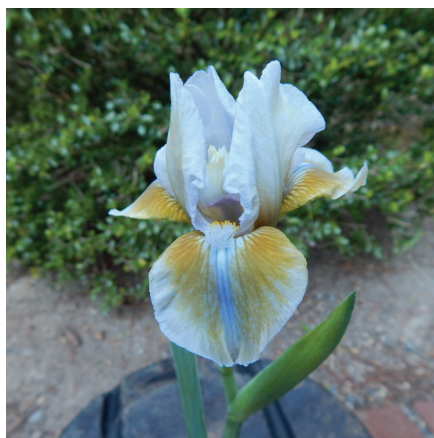
This author still makes cross-pollinations each spring for tall bearded cool season rebloomers. Recent efforts, however, have shifted somewhat to the standard dwarf bearded class (SDB). These median bearded irises are ideal for colder climates. Smaller bloomstalk development means quicker flowering sequences in spring and fall. Fans are also able to protect potential bloom from hard frosts. Evaluation time for reliability is

reduced. New angles for future breeding appear in shorter time periods.

One of the late Dr. Lloyd Zurbrigg's best-known reblooming bearded irises was a SDB. 'Baby Blessed' (Zurbrigg 1979) is still a great fall performer in my Central Virginia trial gardens. The former Cook-Douglas Award winner in 1989 is a light yellow with a small white spot on each fall. Its pedigree is SDB 'Baby Snowflake' (M. Peterson 1963) x SDB 'Twice Blessed' (D. Dennis 1966). A closer examination of each parent reveals a unique approach to rebloom breeding. Welch H 350 *pumila* can be found in 'Baby Snowflake's' roots. *I. pumila* Schecht is present in 'Twice Blessed'.

My mentor would introduce more SDBs. None of them was the equal or better than 'Baby Blessed' until the arrival of 'Sailboat Bay' (Zurbrigg 2004) in 2000. The near blue amoena was originally introduced by Friendship Gardens as an Intermediate Bearded. Fortunately for my mentor, it grew as an SDB for me in Central Virginia. A bloomstalk appeared in time to be exhibited at the 2004 AIS Region 4 Fall Meeting Flower Show. Judges agreed 'Sailboat Bay' was really a SDB, so Lloyd thankfully changed the registration prior to his passing in 2005.

Like that of the groundbreaking tall bearded rebloomer 'Clarence' (Zurbrigg 1991), the parentage of 'Sailboat Bay' was lost. After Zurbrigg retired from the Radford College Music Department in the late '80s, planting space shrunk



Top: 'SailboatBay' (Lloyd Zurbrigg 2001, SDB); middle: Seedling 1253-1Re; bottom: Seedling 21254SBDRe

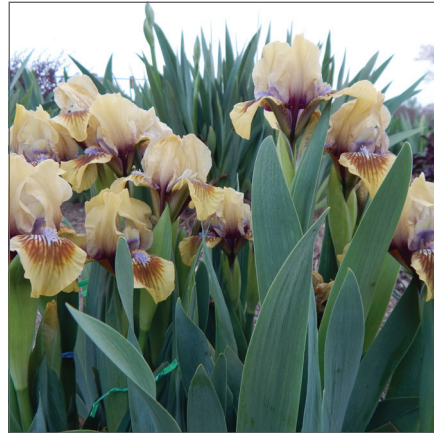
from six gardens in Radford to a few beds around his new Durham, NC, home. Median seedlings were jammed into the front foundation planting with minimal sun and questionable soil. To make matters worse, hired help would inadvertently relocate plant tags during weeding or cultivating. It was a miracle Lloyd Zurbrigg's best effort since 'Baby Blessed' survived to be released.

This author was fortunate to receive Lloyd's studbook after his death. The "Black Book" contained information regarding seeds planted each year from cross pollinations plus re-select notes dating back to the late seventies. Adjusting for growth habit and my own early 'Sailboat Bay' offspring, I believe the Zurbrigg SDB rebloomer's heritage is likely to be Zurbrigg #QQ27 or (SDB Marita (Zurbrigg 1989) x Baby Blessed) X (SDB Little Showoff (E. Hall 1989) x SDB Be Happy (Aitken 1990). The combination has a rich cool season rebloom legacy.

The 'Marita' lineage is TB Immortality (Zurbrigg 1982) x Welch *pumila* 503. If I have indeed stumbled onto 'Sailboat Bay's true identity, *I. pumila* appears three times in its background. The rationale behind this bold strategy was to incorporate more rebloom, color diversity, and continued fertility into SDBs by using *I. pumila* as pollen parent with selected tall bearded. Lloyd loved the amoena pattern in bearded irises. By using 'Immortality' (I Do (Zurbrigg 1974) x TB English Cottage (Zurbrigg 1976), he could inject the pattern into his blue SDB line. 'I Do' features near amoena, 'Grand Baroque' (Zurbrigg 1969) in its pedigree.

I always felt 'Sailboat Bay' could be an important next step in SDB cool season rebloom development. Favorable spring weather

conditions led to many successful cross-pollinations with rebloom SDB named varieties and seedlings in 2012. Children from 'Sailboat Bay' x 'Sweethearts Again' (J.P. Hill, 2004) or **(21253 & 21254)** and the reverse combination **(21248)** dominated seedlings planted at J. Sargeant Reynolds Community College in Goochland County, VA. Other notable SDB crosses contributing seedlings there were **(21245)** with 'Senorita Frog' (D. Spoon 2002), Mitch Jameson SDB Re Sdlg. No.#A88 **(21255 & 21256)** and Jameson SDB Re Sdlg. No.#B88.



Top: Seedling 21245-2Re;
middle: Seedling Jameson A88;
bottom: Seedling 21256SDB

My original trial beds at JSRCC were designed to test new and old fall flowering selections for reliability. The best ones could theoretically be grouped together in one bed to create spring-like bloom each fall. This approach paid handsome dividends for the 2013 Region 4 Fall Meeting in South Richmond. Attendees were treated to a stunning bloomstalk bonanza, allowing me to conduct a rare fall in-garden judge's training for rebloomers.

After this triumph, I received permission from the JSRCC Horticulture Department to convert a small, unused area off the main display to design and install a raised seedling bed. The space would be filled during the fall in 2014 with both SDB and TB rebloom hopefuls from 2012 and 2013 cross-pollinations. Plants growing in six-inch pots were selected based on vigor and quick increase. The bed was constructed with imported "topsoil." Organic fertilizers, calcitic lime, coarse mason sand, and mushroom compost were mixed with excavated soil for backfill around each planted seedling.

Despite good growth after fall planting, only three seedlings flowered the following spring.

A child from **(21245)** stood out. Standards were white and falls were white with a light greenish yellow overlay around light blue beards. All SDB seedlings had mature clumps heading into last fall. Early October, however, saw no bloomstalk formation taking place. My optimism sank.

The Central Virginia Iris Society (CVIS) held its annual picnic at JSRCC on Saturday afternoon, October 17. During the garden tour, developing bloomstalks on the SDB seedlings were finally beginning to form. By the next morning, tall bearded in fall flower had sustained significant damage from a hard frost. The SDB children were thankfully untouched by Nature's wrath and flowers were in abundance by October's end.

A rare second season was underway and would not end until early January. Thirty-one 'Sailboat Bay' seedlings out of 41 planted produced open blooms during that span. Bloomstalk height and bud count varied, but a mini-drought from late August through early October could have easily affected timing and flowering habit. Colors and patterns were selfs, bitones and near amoenas. 'Sailboat Bay' was proving its worth as a viable cool season rebloom parent.

Some additional 'Sailboat Bay' children were also planted in a display at BP Market, 9200 Midlothian Turnpike, North Chesterfield, VA (South Richmond). One seedling each from **21245** and **21255** had impressive fall bloom. The latter hopeful had initial flowering in time for the Fredericksburg Area Iris Society's (FAIS) Harvest Dinner on November 14, 2015. More flowering commenced a few days after Christmas on five stalks. The real star, however, at BP Market, was a seedling produced from a 'Sailboat Bay' x 'Inner Space' (Tasco 2009) combination.

Lockatell SDB Re Sdlg. No.#21068 had initial fall bloom in 2014. Flowers are light yellow with a faint maroon thumbprint on each

fall upon opening. Substance and bud count were however a concern. After scant spring bloom in 2015, **Lockatell Sdlg. No.# 21068** flowered non-stop from July through December for an eye-popping seven month rebloom sequence!! Could 'Immortality's presence in the proposed parentage for 'Sailboat Bay' be the driver behind **21068's** continuous flowering? The white TB rebloomer does produce summer rebloom here.

Central Virginia saw a brutal spring in 2016 featuring two late frosts. This seedling still bloomed heavily in late March and early April. Cross-pollinations with this promising child thankfully produced three seed pods. After a short rest, four new bloomstalks emerged in late May prior to me leaving for the AIS National Convention in NJ.

Fall weather conditions in 2015 for Richmond were unique and likely not to be repeated again for years to come. Thanks to above normal daily high/low temperatures for both November and December, root growth on my SDB rebloom seedlings did not shut down. Quick transition from bloomstalk initiation to flowering became an important ingredient driving fall results. Keep in mind, the Richmond area broke the December daily high temperature record dating back to the 1890s. Many flowering shrubs were fooled into blooming at the same time due to these growing conditions.

Heading into the fall bloom season for 2016, my faith in using the late Lloyd Zurbrigg's last cool-season SDB rebloom introduction for breeding was vindicated in 2015. The best seedlings will be lined out after clump division in early September. Hopefully, reliability will continue. As stated previously, rebloom breeding is still largely a numbers game. There are more 'Sailboat Bay' children to plant. If past results are any indication, the Zurbrigg rebloom legacy will spark more fall flowering on SDB seedlings residing in my Central Virginia iris plantings.



*Top: Seedling 21245-1Re;
bottom: Seedling 21068 continuous rebloomer*



JSRC Garden rebloom in October, 2013



'Sailboat Bay' children reblooming in Virginia, early October, 2015



South Richmond display bed

A special thank you to Jim Morris for urging me to update the original draft of this article for publication. This author is grateful to Jim for furnishing iris gardeners and breeders with the latest seedling performance in all bearded iris classes from anywhere in the U.S. and Canada.