

Presby Defies Time

-STORY AND PHOTOS BY MIKE LOCKATELL, RIS EASTERN DIRECTOR

A world renowned iris garden can be found in a bustling Northern New Jersey suburban community. A stone's throw from New York City, the Presby Memorial Iris



Presby Entrance Sign

Gardens located at 475 Upper Mountain Avenue, Upper Montclair, NJ is a repository for fifteen hundred plus varieties in all iris classifications. The display beds arranged in two half arcs resembling a rainbow were designed by American Iris Society (AIS) founder and former president John Wister. Wister also donated varieties to the early historic iris collection growing on the "Rainbow on the Hill."



1927 Memorial Stone

The Presby Memorial Iris Gardens are listed in the NJ and National Register of Historic Sites. The plantings were conceived as a tribute to Frank H. Presby, another AIS founder and prominent Montclair resident. Presby had an exclusive iris collection to use for iris breeding. After the township purchased Mountainside Park, he passed away in 1924 before he was able to plant his irises there.

Barbara Walther and her husband Fred purchased the Upper Montclair property alongside Mountainside Park in 1918 to build a home. Barbara had a botany degree from the University of Chicago and was a Montclair Garden Club and Women's Club charter member. She was the perfect choice to lead the Citizen's Committee entrusted with Presby's construction and care. Walther's involvement with the iris garden would continue into her nineties before her death in 1977 on the Gardens' fiftieth anniversary. The Citizens Committee was formally incorporated in 1963 and purchased the Walther property in 1977 after Barbara's passing. The house became the Citizen Committee's official headquarter and also houses a valuable historical archive to rival the AIS library.



A Sampling of the 2014 Bloom Season

The Gardens' care is no trivial matter. Presby relies on a skeleton staff and eager volunteers to keep the display beds in top notch shape. The yearly budget runs between \$150,000 and \$200,000. In order to put the iris garden on a firmer financial footing, Essex County agreed to purchase the Walther House and grounds from the Citizens Committee in 2009. The sale proceeds were used to shore up the endowment for yearly operation. Individual donations and fund raising events are pursued each year to help with expenses. Staff and the Citizens Committee members work together on this important task.

bearded classifications reached fifty-four bringing the grand total to one hundred fifty-three registered or introduced cultivars. Wow!!

After the Bed 20 reorganization took place, Claudia recalls the following story: "I was working one September day in the planting. A car pulled up and the driver jumped out. Excuse me. I see the iris in the bed all have blooms, isn't it rather late for them? Must be global warming? I laughed and said, yeah and it beamed itself to one spot in Montclair. No, they are supposed to do that. He was enlightened."

Presby played host to three AIS National Conventions from 1960 through 1970. These marquee events solidified the Garden's role as the iris world's ultimate showcase. The upcoming 2016 edition inspired 98 hybridizers to send 794 bearded and 93 beardless guest irises for the meeting. The Master Planting is at the Montclair site with two gardens in Pennsylvania as further garden tour destinations.

The garden's glorious history is cleverly chronicled in display beds for each decade. The early bearded historic holdings are dominated by cultivars from Grace and Robert Sturtevant, Bertrand Farr plus Hans and Jacob Sass. Farr's Mildred Presby (1923) still resides in the collection. Thanks to Walther's foresight, Presby also maintains a bed with every Dykes Medal Award winner voted by American Iris Society judges. Two historic beds however were damaged due to vandalism on August 3, 2005. After drinking at a local country club, three area teenagers descended on the Presby plantings at night with a golf club to practice their swings. After their rampage was over, 156 rhizomes had been uprooted and



'Eleanor Roosevelt' In Shadow

Unlike some public iris plantings, Presby strives to represent each area of current cultivation. My initial visits to the Upper Montclair site reinforce this philosophy. Residing along a now restored creek bed, a display bed featuring Lloyd Zurbrigg's "remontant irises" was competing with existing grassy and broadleaf weeds. Since this author had no experience with reblooming bearded irises at the time, this technical term stuck in my mind until I met Dr. Zurbrigg at a Spring Meeting for AIS Region 4 the following year.

Claudia Kolster, Presby's former garden director recalls the decision to unite all tall bearded rebloomers in one display area. "The garden team felt this strategy would allow for an eye catching second show in milder falls with delayed frosts." Bed 20 has eighty-three historic and modern selections planted there with 40 producing bloomstalks this past fall. Median varieties raise the overall total to 99 in the collection with three reblooming. With the Gardens' hosting the 2016 AIS National Convention, remontant guest irises sent for the meeting in all



'Fra Angelico' 2010

scattered. The case went cold for a spell before informants inspired by a \$1,000.00 reward fingered the guilty parties leading to their arrests. The teens were convicted and sentenced to community service. Their time was spent preparing and planting the destroyed beds.

Whether by criminal activity, staff turnover or different approaches to culture, it is sometimes easy to find mistaken identities. Barbara Walther was responsible for Presby's extensive recordkeeping until her passing in 1977. She verified each iris with name of variety, originator and date of origin in the original card data base. Records are now stored and tracked thanks to a comprehensive software program. "No IDs" still unfortunately appear. The Garden has been grateful to visiting historic iris growers and collectors to solve lost identities. A huge recent coup was confirming existence in the plantings of the diploid IB 'Fra Angelico' (Vilmorin 1926.) Staff hopes more mysteries can be resolved at the Convention.



View of Walther House with 'Thornbird'

Presby is also a major participant in iris exchanges with public gardens in the US and around the world. The NJ iris garden recently scored a major coup with one of Europe's largest public iris gardens with the help of Historic Iris Preservation Society's Laetitia Munro. The HIPS representative contacted curator Milan Blazek from the Chotobuz Botanical Garden located at the Czech Republic's Pruhonice Park. Mr. Blazek oversees the iris genetic resource collection there. He won the Warburton Medal given by AIS in 2006 for gathering a unique collection to preserve all historic steps in hybridizing garden irises with the accent on the borderline between natural and garden forms of the genus *Iris*. Arrangements were made to send valuable divisions of early historic

hybrids to Montclair including TB 'King George' (Perry, 1911). The British introduction with *I. cengialtii* heritage was reported to rebloom in Eastern gardens by John C. Wister.

HIPS has also instituted the "Guardian Garden Program" to preserve historic irises at Presby by sending divisions upon request to cooperating public gardens in the U.S. With the help of Suzanne Broullon, Presby's Communications and Donor Manager and HIPS Doug Paschall, bearded historic selections between 1880 and 1920 will soon be on display at South Richmond, VA's historic Maymont Park. The Dooley Estate is the best time capsule to exist of the Gilded Age in America. Of the many heirloom plants on the property, bearded irises were a choice perennial in the gardens.

As garden visitors walk through display beds for each decade, there is an instant appreciation for the immense progress made in modern iris breeding. The original work of early trailblazers such as Farr and the Sturtevant's is embellished by the dedicated efforts of Joe Ghio, Keith Keppel, Robert Schreiner and others. It is great fun to see in real time the evolution of selfs, bitones, bicolors and of course plicatas. It can be overwhelming in a single encounter.

A stroll in May through the plantings is like stepping into a H. G. Wells time machine. Visitors can imagine John C. Wister and Barbara Walther overseeing each display bed's early construction and maintenance. Presby is the iris world's best imitation of the Smithsonian Institute. The incredible progress in U.S. iris breeding from the early Twentieth Century to the present comes alive in dazzling shapes, colors and patterns for young and old to enjoy each year. As a native of Northern New Jersey, it is a great honor to have such a world renowned public iris garden near the iconic New York City Skyline. Please visit often and consider a small monetary donation to preserve a piece of iris history for gardening generations to come.

Editor's Note: Mike Lockatell is the Eastern Director for the Reblooming Iris Society. His original feature article entitled "Presby Sees Rebloom" appeared in the Reblooming Iris Recorder's Spring 2015 Edition. He has updated the copy for the AIS Bulletin.