

Rebloom Seeks Larger Audiences

by Mike Locketell, AIS Region 4

Rebloom performance can be elusive and downright frustrating. Results can be influenced by many factors. Micro-climate and cultural practice are high on the list. What is an avid gardener to do?

For the past two years, I have tabulated the daily high and low temperatures for Richmond, VA at Byrd Airport. An acknowledged trigger for summer and fall flowering is night temperatures dipping below 60°F. Central Virginia

usually experiences Nature's Bounty sometime during August. A brief cold front moves through our area offering relief from oppressive heat and humidity. Some new and old varieties in all bearded classes respond with bloomstalks by Labor Day.



Mike Locketell

Good cultural practice improves rebloom prospects. Since my visit to Kansas City in 2010, my new strategy here is to create public rebloom-
ing iris displays around town and in the suburbs. My first effort was at J. Sargeant Reynolds Community College in Goochland, VA. The Ornamental Horticulture Department gave me bed space in their display garden on campus. Installation took place during June in 2011. A clay-loam soil was heavily modified before planting with well-rotted

leaf compost. Soil backfill for potted plants was further enhanced with coarse builder's sand and organic fertilizer components.

Varieties from all bearded classes were chosen for reliability and overall performance. Herbaceous peonies (including some outstanding selections from Don Hollingsworth) were flanked in one bed by tall beardeds. Medians in the adjoining planting shared space with a Korean boxwood hedge (Not my idea.). Companion plants in either display bed thankfully did not compromise flowering.

Goochland is typically five degrees cooler than Richmond. Its western location is both a blessing and a curse. Summer rebloom becomes a real possibility, but there are also frost dangers in late October to abruptly end any fall bloom. The show usually ends in early November. Jack Frost was a week early this year during peak flowering for a second time in late October

With clump division looming in 2014, two year results have been spectacular. Continuous bloom has been achieved on some selections regardless of class from June until first frost. TBs 'Pink Attraction' (E. Hall, 1988), 'Queen Dorothy' (E. Hall, 1984), 'Again and Again' (Innerst, 1999), 'Over and Over' (Innerst, 2000) and IB 'I'll Be Back' (Aitken, 2004) led the way each year.

Central Virginia experienced an uncharacteristically mild summer this past

year. Wet conditions were also favorable for Southern Blight or *Sclerotium rolfsii* after receiving 51.68 inches of rainfall. Constant vigilance was necessary to keep this devastating disease in check. Fungal Leaf Spot or *Didymella macrospora* pressure was also high during this period. Abnormal weather conditions likely delayed summer flowering on TBs 'My Friend Jonathan' (B. Miller, 1996), 'I Do' (Zurbrigg, 1974), 'Gate of Heaven' (Zurbrigg, 2004) along with medians such as MTB 'Lady Emma' (F. Jones, 1986) and SDB 'Baby Blessed' (Zurbrigg, 1979) at JSRRC.



Reblooming iris display garden

Another public display bed was established during February in 2012 at Maymont Park in South Richmond. A Victorian estate bequeathed to the City of Richmond, historic buildings and grounds are now maintained by a private foundation. After discussions with the Director of Horticulture, a tall bearded rebloom planting was installed behind the

Carriage House protected by six foot masonry walls. Maymont however secured funds to restore masonry on the building, so the irises were dug in late fall and placed in a holding bed. They were re-installed as bare roots in March. Expectations were low for any meaningful rebloom. Bloomstalks incredibly began appearing on 'Lunar Whitewash' (Innerst, 2003) and 'My Friend Jonathan'; in mid- September.

My final act as Reblooming Iris Chairman was to host the Region 4 (West Virginia, North Carolina, Virginia, Maryland and the District of Columbia) Fall Meeting in South Richmond on October 18th and 19th. Garden tours were planned for JSRCC and Maymont Park. Rebloom at both locations was a huge relief. Even a freak heat wave in early October did not diminish the JSRCC show. Spring-like bloom greeted Saturday visitors allowing me to conduct in-garden AIS Judges Training on rebloom. Wow!!



'My Friend Jonathan' clump

My latest project has been to create a reblooming iris display in a circular bed at a neighborhood gas station along a major east-west state highway in South Richmond around the corner from my home. Progress has been slow. Work began this past winter by raising grade in the planting area with blended top soil. The growing medium was heavily modified with leaf compost to replicate the trial planting at J. Sargeant Reynolds Community College. Reblooming iris installation did not begin until early September. Backfill for bare roots and potted examples used the same coarse



Display garden rebloom

builder's sand and organic fertilizer amendments. Amazingly, flowering occurred on a few clumps in time for the Fall Meeting.

My late mentor and friend, Dr. Lloyd Zurbrigg felt creating rebloomers with summer flowering tendencies was crucial to enhancing public popularity. There are now signs this goal may be realized. 'Clarence' (Zurbrigg, 1991) offspring are starting to

show promise in this area. Based on my results from the past two years, 'Again and Again', 'Over and Over' and 'Lunar White-wash' released by the late Sterling Innerst may hold similar promise.

Future rebloom testing in Richmond will continue to pursue a sound growing environment and consistent cultural practice for evaluation. If the gas station site turns in similar results to JSRCC and Maymont Park, gardeners would be wise to pursue well-drained organic soils for optimal fall performance.

Breeding likewise needs to find seedlings capable of late summer blooming under any weather or growing condition. The genetics are there. It boils down to making the right combinations. For rebloom hybridizers, the odds are now in our favor.



'Lady Emma' rebloom

Editor's Note: Mike Lockett of Roots and Blooms in Powhatan, Virginia is a nationally recognized hybridizer of hybrid Siberian Iris and reblooming bearded iris. Mike visited the Kansas City area in the Spring of 2010, giving presentations on reblooming iris to the Greater Kansas City Iris Society as well as the Pony Express Iris Society.