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## A Tribute to My Mentor

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It is hard to imagine spring iris bloom without Lloyd Zurbrigg. His tutelage over the past five plus years has enabled me to develop a love for growing, creating and evaluating Siberian and bearded irises for the perennial garden.

My late mother's favorite garden plants were irises and herbaceous peonies. Thanks to plantings at my aunt and uncle's home and the guidance of long time growers Ethelene and Charles Gray, the attention of this landscape professional began to focus on bearded irises. The Grays' display gardens at their home in my hometown of Montvale, N.J. were chock full of the best spring blooming tall bearded selections on the iris scene. My new interest in these hardy perennials finally resulted in the establishment of drifts of these eye catching plants in front yard beds at my parents new home in Richmond, Virginia.

After coming to Richmond in 1996, I eventually joined the local chapter of the American Iris Society. Carolyn and I attended the AIS Region 4 Spring Meeting in Towson, Maryland in 1998. Aussie breeder Barry Blyth was the headline speaker at that event, but we always remember a tall and handsome gentleman on the two day tour surveying irises at each garden stop wearing his signature white safari hat.

Our next encounter with Lloyd would be back in Richmond. He gave a program at a CVIS winter meeting on the latest

developments in his various breeding lines. He showed two slide trays worth of interesting seedlings, so Carolyn and I decided to come to Durham, N. C. to see his garden in spring bloom. It was an overwhelming experience for two first time visitors. We saw row after row of predominantly white blooms with various shadings of yellow on the fall shoulders thanks to the constant use of MESMERIZER, RENOWN and SUNNY SHOULDERS. After a few hours of his patient reciting of seedling numbers and parentages from his black ringed stud book, our heads were literally spinning!! It would take me a few years to easily recognize the parents and merits for instance of 0026, 0032C, 0033 and MASTERWORK.

The coming of the new millennium soon transformed a casual association into a close friendship centered on the further development of his legendary breeding lines. We finally convinced Lloyd to visit my garden in spring 02. Carolyn picked him up at the train station, and his initial reaction to seeing the garden was priceless. "I never expected anything like this!!" It was a joy of a lifetime having him walk through each iris row with me. We evaluated my first crop of seedlings and countless named varieties. He was interviewed by a local newspaper reporter and watched proudly as a film crew taped a segment for my appearance on a local public television gardening show. Doc adorned in a iris apron and armed with a pair of tweezers and a box of pollen envelopes from seedlings and named varieties growing in his own garden, he had the rare luxury of having two bloom seasons to make crosses. Plans began in earnest to bring some of his older seedlings from Durham to Richmond for evaluation and further breeding.



Photo: Photo: Lloyd Zurbrigg and Mike Lockatell Spring 2004,  
Courtesy of Mike Lockatell

We would share two more springs together evaluating old and new seedlings, making crosses and looking for new ideas to try in the future. Carolyn and I cherished the time Lloyd spent with us each spring. We finally decided to have the living room piano tuned before his 04 visits. We shared memorable moments of music and song each night before dinner. The sheet music for a song composed by one of wife Nita's music students, still resides on the music holder waiting for Doc to play it on his next visit.

My second crop of seedlings bloomed for the first time this past spring and fall. The best ones for rebloom featured Zurbrigg breeding lines as part of the parentages. Spring flowering saw unseasonably hot temperatures, but he nonetheless spent equal time looking at and breeding with hopefuls from both of our lines. Carolyn noted his satisfaction with our progress, and he spoke highly of his W72 seedlings in his last contribution for the Reblooming Iris Robin.

I brought bloomstalks from two of his older seedlings to the Region 4 Fall Flower Show in Fredericksburg. Even though neither one won top honors in the seedling division, PP36 and RR39 received a lot of favorable attention at the meeting. Lloyd came to Richmond for a final time to see my garden in fall bloom. His health had worsened since spring, but he found enough resolve to spend two days with us and to look at three of his older rebloom seedlings PP61 , SS111 and SS129 in full bloom. A couple of additional fall hopefuls were unfortunately still in bud stage, but we had great fun speculating on their eventual bloom. We agreed, at the time, there was nothing to introduce, but some of our seedlings had lots of breeding potential.

News soon indicated Lloyd had an inoperable malignant tumor on his liver. His condition began to deteriorate, and he was unable to write a contribution to the latest round of the Reblooming Iris Robin. I ended up composing a report for both of us highlighting the best fall rebloom in years for Central Virginia and Region 4. It was ironic I would soon get sick too, and my subsequent recuperation prevented me from seeing him one last time. Photo: Lloyd

Posted by [Mike Lockett](#) at 10:29 PM No comments: