

Iris Japonica and its Hybrids

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The Evansia section of the genus *Iris* shows more variety of form, size and habit than any of the other sections. It is sometimes difficult for the beginner to believe that the tall bamboo-like *Iris watti* and the little *I. cristata* can in any way be related, or that there can be any connection between the delicate *I. gracilipes* and the bold and large flowered *I. tectorum*. There seems to be a lot of difference between the February blooming habit of *I. japonica* and the May blooming *I. milesi*. Nor can one be inclined to place in the same category the hardy and deciduous *I. lacustris* and the tender and evergreen *I. japonica*.

This great variation is no doubt accounted for at least partially by the fact that the different members of the section come from widely scattered geographic locations. There is much difference in the climatic conditions of our Great Lakes states and Japan, and the lowlands of China and the foothills of the Himalayas. The subject of this article is native to Japan and Central China and grows in woodlands and moist locations.

I have grown this iris, also known as *I. fimbriata*, for the past twenty years with varying degrees of success in culture but never a failure in flowering it. Given a location where it receives either filtered sunlight or afternoon shade it seems to succeed well. It does prefer a light soil rich in humus, and appreciates a heavy mulch of leafmold or pine needles. As it seems to be in active growth throughout the year it should be kept well watered at all times. Here in Southern California it starts to bloom about February 15 when we have had a mild winter and later when the winters are colder. This year we have had unprecedented cold weather and at this writing (Feb. 20) there is not even a sign of flower buds. However a week of mild weather will hasten the blooming and they should start to flower by the middle of March; because of the great number of buds produced, they should be still in bloom by the first of May.

The rhizome is very small and thin and lies just under the mulch of leaves. The roots also are on the surface and do not penetrate to any great extent into the soil. For this reason the large and heavy flower stem has a tendency to lie flat on its side just as it starts to

The flowers of *Iris japonica* are small but perfectly proportioned and exquisite in their delicacy of color and frilly detail.



bloom, especially if there should be a heavy rainstorm or wind. This defect is partially corrected when the plant is grown in open sunlight but then the lovely green leaves are apt to sunburn during the summer heat.

The flowers are very graceful, about 3 inches across. Both the petals and style branches are well fimbriated and the general ground color is light lavender. The crest is deep yellow with some violet spotting in the haft. It is very orchid-like in appearance and locally it is often referred to as the Orchid Iris. It is often used for corsage making even though the flowers are very short-lived.

The foliage is evergreen, shiny bright green on top and dull green on the reverse side. It grows to a height of about two feet and is worth growing for the foliage alone. It makes an excellent effect when grown among ferns and begonias and when well grown makes an excellent ground cover.

There is a hardier variety of this iris named *Uwodu*. It is unmistakably a variety but is so different from the type in many respects that it can be treated in the garden as a distinct iris. While

the type form has smooth leaves, the leaves of Uwodu are somewhat pleated on the order of *I. tectorum*, and of a brighter green color and more polished surface. While the type form sends out short stolons making compact clumps, Uwodu sends out long, thread-like suckers sometimes three feet long, sending up young plants every few nodes and soon taking over the neighboring territory with a solid mass of foliage.

The flowers on this are a little smaller but with broader segments, making a well rounded flower. The color is nearly white with yellow crest and many well defined deep violet spots in the haft. It is definitely a shy bloomer because it seems to use all of its strength in vegetative growth.

Iris watti (*confusa*) resembles these two types in its flowering habit and shape of flowers. It differs in its above-ground stem or rhizome, if one can call the bamboo-like stems a rhizome. I have seen this species five feet high, holding up the lovely fan of leaves and graceful flower stems without resort to staking. The late W. R. Dykes, writing in *The Gardeners' Chronicle* of May 28, 1921, said, "Among the Evansias something good might come from the crossing of *I. watti*, which does so well when planted out in a cool house. It ought to cross with *I. japonica* . . ." Mr. Dykes was unable to make the cross because he had no luck in flowering the plants and when they did at last bloom they did not respond to cross pollenization. At best they are shy seeders even in Southern California where they bloom profusely.

It seems that Mr. J. C. Stevens, of Greenville, N. Y., and myself, working independently, made this cross at about the same time, except that I used the *japonica* type form and he used the variety Uwodu. At any rate the hybrids raised were both registered in the year 1936, and in both instances *watti* was used as the pollen parent. The results obtained, while being equally lovely, are quite distinct in many respects.

Mr. Stevens' variety was named Fairyland and mine Nada. The Fairyland plant is unlike either parent. The foliage is very narrow, dark green and superficially resembles a California species. It makes a very compact growth and is quite low-growing. It flowers in April on upright, short-branched stems with many flowers nearly the size of *watti*. The color is white heavily and attractively spotted deep violet. It is a good pot plant.

Nada has very large foliage, larger than either parent, bright



Nada grows well outdoors in mild climates and is an excellent house or greenhouse plant in other sections.

green, which grows fan-shaped on 12-inch stems. Well grown plants will stand about three feet high. The flowers are produced earlier than Fairyland's and are a shade smaller than those of japonica, but much more numerous. I have had as many as 200 flowers on one stem over a three-month period. I think Nada has more flowers per stem and a longer blooming season than any other iris. The flowers are well ruffled, white with a slight lavender sheen with yellow crest and light lavender spotting in the haft. As the flower stem is strong and wiry, it is held up well and does not flop over. When cut, nearly every bud develops. It makes an excellent house or greenhouse plant and is very attractive when planted in a hanging basket.

Nada is not sterile and will produce seeds either selfed or crossed back to either parent. However it is a very shy seeder and that is the reason why I have been unable to raise many more varieties from succeeding generation crosses. The only other one on the market now is a selfed seedling of Nada which is named Darjeeling. This is an improvement over Nada in size of flower and ruffling. I have been trying to obtain a lavender colored plant with the watti habit, but the lavender color seems to be recessive. Of the many seedlings I raised I have never been able to select a colored one. All are white or very light colored. The only other plant I selected but did not name is a plant identical with watti in habit and flower, but taller growing and with the flower stems profusely branched. There would be no use in introducing this plant because it is too much like the species, so I grow it for my own pleasure.

This group of plants is easy to grow in all but the coldest sections. I don't know how much cold they will take but I am inclined to believe that they will survive near zero weather. However, if grown in pots and brought under protection in the winter anyone can grow them. We grow tender plants like orchids by providing right conditions, so why not take a little more trouble and grow these lovely varieties and species? It has always been strange to me that people will go to a lot of trouble to provide winter conditions for such things as fuchsias, geraniums and coleus but when it comes to tender varieties of iris they just say they can't, and quit.

Supplementing Mr. Giridlian's article, the BULLETIN is glad to offer the following experience reports from members who have tried Iris japonica and its hybrids:

TRAIL, BRITISH COLUMBIA, CANADA—My experience with japonica is limited. Last spring I bought a plant which grew to fill a 10-inch pot. All winter it has been next to a basement window in a temperature of about 50 degrees F. and it is now (Feb. 14) starting into vigorous growth. Confusa is growing under similar conditions.

From October till the first of March a mountain cuts me off from the sun, so I have not taken indoor gardening very seriously. I was amazed to find *I. bakeriana*, planted in mid-November, in spite of low temperature (35-40 degrees) attempts to retard it, come into *full* bloom when moved to a basement window, and it has been in flower for ten days. Perhaps all of the *reticulata* section will bloom under such conditions. Of course I will give the plants sun as soon as possible to mature the bulbs.