

Book Review 'Bliss Irises' Jennifer Hewitt

Bliss Irises

The Journey to a National Collection.
Anne Milner, Matador
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Paperback, 233pp.
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This is a book for every iris addict who has an interest in history, which includes an engrossing story and the results of diligent searching and meticulous research. I found myself gripped by it even though I don't grow bearded irises, because it is so informative and well written, and I am full of admiration for Anne's determined efforts to trace, identify and obtain as many as possible of Arthur Bliss's surviving irises.



There is a lot more involved in holding a National Collection, if you do the job properly, than you might imagine. Gardening is said to be very popular, but with the vicissitudes affecting the nursery trade, plants come and go and valuable genetic material can be lost without the dedication of growers, both NC holders and others. She didn't begin with an interest in irises or knowledge of the man who was one of the foremost hybridisers of the early 20th century. Researching family history led to meeting a 'lost' cousin who, like Anne, was descended from one of Bliss's brothers (he had no children) and whose mother Phyllis had, as a child, been his assistant with the irises. Two plants were still in the cousin's garden and pieces of these, plus another given from the University of Oxford Botanic Garden, became the foundation of Anne's collection. (I remember seeing the iris bed at Oxford, and Katherine Dykes' yellow 'Gudrun' whose name had mutated to 'Good Run'...but Bliss's 'Bruno' was there).

Wanting to know more about Arthur she joined the British Iris Society, where I hope not all reactions were as discouraging as the one she quotes. Much more helpfully, she discovered the Historic Iris Preservation Society, a section of the American Iris Society devoted to doing what its name says, and found like minds among its members. These and other international contacts brought more information and more Bliss irises – 'reputed' Blisses, one should say. Even one from Phyllis's garden, labelled 'Dominion' (which was the first to have velvet-textured falls, caused a storm of interest and greatly influenced the breeding of bearded irises) proved to be something else. (Anne did find it later.) She had to learn not to believe labels but search out authoritative descriptions, with illustrations where they existed, and then learn to compare them with her plants in every detail. The importance of correct identification is crucial.

Part 1 of the book tells these stories, including travel in Britain and mainland Europe, setting up a website, becoming a National Collection holder for Plant Heritage, staging a stand at the RHS Hampton Court Flower Show and then appearing on television with all the hassle that both entailed, but which created invaluable publicity.

Part 2 forms the largest section, beginning with detailed descriptions of the 27 irises in the collection, whose identities have been definitely confirmed. This is not a great number when one reads that he named around 170, though not all were introduced by nurseries, but it is a testament to their ability to survive a century of varying conditions and treatment – a quality possessed by how many modern cultivars? It would be interesting to do a survey 100 years from now. Next come eight which Anne is growing but have names yet to be confirmed as not all have flowered for her, or they arrived unnamed and closely resemble the descriptions attached to possible names but still have slight question marks over them. The last chapter lists all the other Bliss irises known to have been named with such information as Anne has found and the hope that some may still exist, somewhere, and come to light one day. This would be another good reason for acquiring the book; if you visit gardens and see historic irises there, Anne would probably be pleased to hear from you with any information that might be worth following up. Perhaps in time there may be a second edition, or a supplement, with more irises found and identified.

Finally there is an appendix listing irises with purple based foliage which can be a distinguishing characteristic (it isn't only the flowers that matter), a bibliography and an index.

The book is very generously illustrated in colour, both photographs (including copies of old ones as well as contemporary blooms) and a number of Fern Harden's delightful watercolours. Excellent though current colour photos and reproduction usually are, there is something special about an artist's work – perhaps personality is more clearly conveyed. The one very minor quibble I have is that the line drawing of a flower to show the names of parts is, in my view, a little less than clear; a more diagrammatic drawing would be less artistic but easier to follow.

Reading and reviewing this book have been a pleasure. Though not all National Collection holders can have such stories to tell it is a fine example of the sort of documentation that Collections need if they are to be useful to future researchers, but the enjoyment comes even more from the pleasure Anne herself has found and which she conveys so well. Bliss's irises are to be found in the ancestry of many of our modern bearded irises and it is good that she has brought him back to our attention in so successful a way. It is a book that deserves to be read and will be enjoyed.