

## THE ITALIAN IRIS SOCIETY: ITS GARDEN AND WORK

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ABSTRACT - The Italian Iris Society was born in Florence (Italy) in 1959 to manage the International contest which started in 1957. This year (1998) we are going to celebrate the 42<sup>nd</sup> edition. The aim is to judge new hybrids from all over the world. The breeders send their rhizomes to Florence three years prior to judgment, made during five days work by five international experts, which are changed every year. The venue of the contest is the Iris Gardens located at the foot of Michelangelo Square. The judgement is made on the general characteristics of the plant and flowers of each variety, in order to award the established prizes, of which the first is a reproduction of the Golden Florin. The contest is normally scheduled in the first half of May, this year 11<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup>, and the announcement of the winner is made in the solemnity of the Town Hall, the famous and well-known "Palazzo Vecchio".

Key words - Iris Society, International competition, Florence

### INTRODUCTION

The Italian Iris Society and its now famous Iris Garden had their beginnings in Rome. In the early 1950's three Committee members of the Society of Friends of the Flowers "Amici dei Fiori"; Contessa Mary Senni, Nita Stross and Flaminia Gorretti Specht, all enthusiastic experts in *Iris* culture, wanted to form an Iris Society. They favoured Florence as its seat because *Iris* was the emblem of Florence, having as its origin the white iris (*Iris florentina*), which grew spontaneously in the valley of the River Arno and in and on the city walls during the early days of the Florentine Republic. The coat of arms on the Florentine flag was originally a white iris on a red background, but after the victory of the Guelf Political Party in the late thirteenth century, the colours were reversed to a red iris on a white background.

Flaminia Gorretti Specht was familiar with other Iris Societies abroad and had many hybridiser friends. She proposed to the Florentine authorities the idea of making an Iris garden in which to promote an international Iris competition. It was not easy to persuade them to finance this adventure, accustomed as they were to seeing only the pale violet flags called "Giaggioli" by the Florentines (*Iris pallida* Lam.) and the darker violet flags of *Iris germanica* flowering in May on the hillsides around Florence or grown in Chianti for the cosmetic industry. Prestige for the city, yes, but hard cash,

no! However, Flaminia flashed her colourful catalogues from international firms specialising in *Iris* hybrids, and won through their resistance, demonstrating that these Irises were quite different from those known to the Florentines.

The ground, about six acres formerly used as a rubbish tip, was given, and meagre funds were handed over rather reluctantly. In 1954 the Iris garden began to be terraced down the slopes below the Michelangelo Square. Architect Zecchi, Engineer Conti and Dr. Luigi Sani were responsible for the formation of the Garden and Flaminia Specht began organising the first International Competition, which met with great success in 1957. Our 42nd Competition was in May 1998. Many donations have been sent over the years and are still arriving to improve the value and beauty of the garden. We have now about 5000 hybrids.

The Society collaborates with Botanical University Institutes all over the world and encourages scientific studies and research. Hybridisers from every part of the world are welcomed and invited to give their views. Photographers, painters, and other artists are to be found working in the garden during the month of May. Exhibitions are arranged in Florence and in other parts of Italy. Talks are given to schools and various clubs in the city, together with rhizomes in order to encourage the cultivation of this genus. Every year a short course in hybridisation is offered to the public. The garden is open from May 2nd to May 20th, for free. The garden is becoming a “must” for tourists, and the Florentine authorities finally have their prestige, but alas finances are still a heartbreak.

#### DONATIONS OF PLANTS

I would like to mention a few of the plant donations made to the Garden, indicated by yellow-coloured tags. These include *I. albicans* Lange (Botanical Garden, University of Florence), *I. kaempheri* Sieb. (Payne Collection), *I. sibirica* L. (McEwen collection), *aril* and *evansia* irises, *I. longipetala* Herb. and *I. ensata* Thunb. (the Eglki collection). In addition, we have the historical collections of the Presby Gardens in New Jersey, the New York Botanical Garden collection, the Blazek collection and the Dykes Medal winners. We have our own beds of red iris, first and second prize winners, and our new species collection put together by Prof. Paolo Gambassini. Two recent collections received are Perry Dyer's ‘medium tall’s’ and the Louisianas. A little collection arrived from California of Pacific coast Irises. Last fall Cy Bartlett sent a collection from the British Iris Society.

The years of the competitions have green tags which show the year of entry, the name of the plant and the hybridiser and the country from where it comes. The awards that a plant receives are also indicated.

#### THE AWARDS

Our international competition has been organised only for Tall Bearded and Border Bearded plants. Usually we have about 150 Tall Bearded entries each year and about 20 Border Bearded and therefore more awards are available to the Tall Bearded. In the future we hope to widen the field to cover other Irises.

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