

THE BOTANIC GARDEN IN PRUHONICE AND ITS *IRIS* COLLECTION

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The Botanic Garden of the Academy of Sciences, the highest scientific body in Czechoslovakia, was established in January 1963. The goals of the Garden were very ambitious: it was planned as the future main Botanic Garden of the state. Therefore the collections were to be extensive, up-to-date and useful for scientific purposes. The site of the Botanic Garden was the famous park of Pruhonice, covering 250 hectares, and for new specialised collections a garden of 20 hectares was also available nearby.

After I came to Pruhonice in September 1963, the genus *Iris* was incorporated into the program because of my experience with both wild and garden irises, and my private collection. My plans were significantly inspired by the first Iris Symposium held in Florence in May 1963, where I participated as the youngest contributor. The aim for the *Iris* collection was to collect as many examples as possible, with the broadest possible range of taxa, and use them in as many directions of work as a Botanic Garden allows. It consisted of wild species, collected in flower if possible, together with all types of garden iris available at that time in commercial and private Czechoslovak gardens, and recent American cultivars obtained mostly from their originators. The imported plants represented the first modern irises blooming in the country after the Second World War. In the sixties and seventies, Pruhonice developed the largest *Iris* collection in any European Botanic Garden. Experimental hybridisations produced dozens of selected clones of local garden value, together with seven international awards.

In particular, the variability of our domestic *I. pumila* L. was used in an extensive hybridisation program. Hybrids of Tall Bearded cultivars with various colour forms of wild *I. pumila* led to the development of several garden hybrids. For example, the white form of *I. pumila* proved very useful in a combination with the recessive tangerine Tall Bearded garden Irises: the second generation of hybrids obtained the colour of the Tall Bearded ancestors. Regarding the other domestic species, *I. aphylla* L., the most interesting and promising clone was an albino form found in the wild, which unfortunately did not survive. Our attempt to cultivate all types of Irises, including the most tender species, showed us that the protection of these species must be done *in situ*, especially due to the *Iris* virus. In the Garden many species must be continually

grown from seed, which can bring a serious danger of genetic erosion. This does not mean that a Botanic Garden cannot participate in the endangered plants protection program, but it is necessary to think not only about theoretical possibilities but also about practicalities and limitations.

European work on *Iris* would probably never have developed to such a degree without the efforts of the enthusiasts who organised previous meetings. In particular, the 1963 Florence Symposium was very important in establishing a scientific program and new friendships, as well as restoring old contacts. It enriched the lives of many people, including those who never heard of Iris Societies. The spirit of the Florence meeting was revived in 1974 at the Pruhonice Iris symposium, which brought together Iris specialists from eleven countries, both eastern and western. Now in Rome again after 35 years, I would like to express the hope that the Rome conference builds on the work of earlier meetings. We are working not just for ourselves but for all those who appreciate the richness of nature, as well as the human endeavour spent on the flowers which carry the name of the Rainbow Goddess.