

Foster Plaque Awarded J. E. Wills



JESSE E. WILLS

Photo by Walden S. Fabry

The British Iris Society annually gives two types of major awards. One is the Dykes Medal which may be awarded to an iris in each of the three countries, England, the United States, and France.

The second of these major awards is the Foster Memorial Plaque honoring that great botanist and irisarian, Sir Michael Foster, the father of the British Iris Society. It is awarded to a person of any nationality who has made a major contribution towards the advancement of the genus, either with respect to hybridizing, or to the furtherance of the society dedicated to its progress. This year the award was made to Jesse Ely Wills of Nashville, Tennessee.

It seems probable that his long service to the AIS must have been foremost in the minds of the men who made the award. Jess Wills has served for more than twenty years on the Board of Directors. He was president of the Society during the difficult war years, and has headed numerous committees vital to the well-being of the Society.

As to his hybridizing efforts, few breeders have been as constant in the pursuit of their original goals. When I first saw Jesse's seedlings in 1935 it was clearly apparent that he was interested in amoenas, reds, and yellow and white bicolors. No one but Jess Wills would have thought that yellow amoenas (as they are called now) would come from SHANNOPIN and FAIR ELAINE, but he did and they did, though not before many a truckload of seedlings went to the compost heap! His amoenas began with WABASH and his reds date to such irises as HERNANI, JUNALUSKA, GARDEN FLAME and DAUNTLESS, varieties that are not even memories to the average member of the AIS today.

Sometime ago I asked Jess what he hoped for from the several thousands of seedlings that fill the landscaped acres behind his beautiful home in Belle Meade and what progress he was making. Let him tell it to you in his own words.

For a good many years now my main objectives have been the following:

1. An effort to get good blue bitones which would be somewhat different from the old neglectas. This line goes way back to the beginning of my breeding which was in part an effort to breed good amoenas. I stopped this last after the introduction of BRIGHT HOUR and GAYLORD. While I got a few fairly nice white and purple amoenas, none were introduced. This line of breeding, however,

did produce SHILOH, which I still think is a very good dark blue-and-purple bitone. SHILOH has not been typical, however, of what I have been working for more recently. I have been trying to get good bitones giving a distinct contrast that would have pale blue or light blue standards and medium blue falls. It has not been easy. The bitone effect came originally from the amoenas, and this meant there was a tendency for the resulting flowers to be strappy, carry too much purple, and also have rough hafts. I have worked in two ways: by continually outcrossing the best of my bitones with good blue selfs, and I have also intercrossed the resulting seedlings. I have gotten irises I liked, but I have wanted them to be as good as the best blue selfs, so have kept on working and waiting. I have named two seedlings from this line—CUMBERLAND and WAVE CREST—but neither has been introduced.

I think I am getting close to the results I want. I have had some rather nice seedlings from 1957 on and last year and this year I blossomed several that I really liked. Incidentally, from this line I have gotten a few pale blue amoenas, several of them fairly nice, though none as outstanding as Paul Cook's WHOLE CLOTH.

YELLOW AMOENAS

2. For years I have been working with yellow amoenas. Here again I have grown hundreds of seedlings with white standards and yellow falls, but I have had a difficult time finding one that entirely satisfied me with its form and intensity of color. Years ago I introduced two: SOFT ANSWER and SILVER FLAME. The last I introduced only as a breeder's iris, and it was a mistake since SOFT ANSWER was the better parent. Its standards, however, were cream and not white. Since then I have named three: (a) SHINING MARK. This has white standards tinged yellow at the base and brassy-yellow falls overlaid brown at times like old NARANJA. Its form, however, was not too good. (b) ANTIPODES. This came from PINNACLE and SOFT ANSWER. It has proved a variable performer. In some years the standards are white and in other years they are cream or pale yellow. While it has nice form, it is not very large. (c) SILVERGILT. This was a decided improvement on the preceding as it was another generation down. It has SOFT ANSWER in it twice, PINNACLE in it once, and MYSTIC MELODY in it once. The standards are white every year and the falls have a medium depth of color that gives good contrast. It is a bigger, taller flower than ANTIPODES.

ROSE REDS AND ROSE PINKS

3. From the beginning I have been trying for better rose-reds and rose-toned pinks. In this third line of breeding I have had much greater success. The line really divides into two parts, which blend into each other since they largely come from similar ancestries.

(a) The rose and pink blends. In these I have introduced DEVOIR, ROSE GARLAND, and ROSE TRIBUTE. This last is one of my favorite irises, though it hasn't done particularly well anywhere else.

(b) The rose-reds. These come from way back from reds com-

bined with pink blends and orange and copper blends. LANCASTER X PRAIRIE SUNSET was a key cross in this. The strain also includes some very early reds of my own as well as outside reds, mainly Greig Lapham's. In this breeding I have tried to get more height, size, and better branching into the reds. Too often reds tend to be short and crowded in the clump. I have noticed that for some reason a red which is tall in its first blooming tends to get shorter and shorter. Incidentally, in working for height I have used your DRUM MAJOR through its child, Greig's TOWN TALK. In this red line my introductions have been: (a) HEART'S DESIRE, which is still nice with me and which is tall and widely branched, (b) CARNTON, and (c) RIGHT ROYAL. RIGHT ROYAL is a rose-red, and CARNTON is a brownish copper-red. All of these, particularly the last two, have proved to be good parents and I now have their blood combined in newer seedlings.

I have named several later ones; BATTLE MORN is a very nice flower, but unfortunately it is a poor grower, so I will probably shift the name. The same thing was true of one of the best rose-pinks, FEALTY. ORENDA is a tall, smooth rose-red which grows and increases. It is an unusual shade of red with a brown infusion. It may be introduced next year, though I am not entirely happy with its form. ROYANAH is, I think, an improved RIGHT ROYAL, with more ruffling in a wide flower. KING'S MOUNTAIN is a seedling of CARNTON and is the most vigorous grower, with one possible exception, that I have had among the reds. It is very tall with a stalk like a broomstick. It has a ruffled, very flaring flower which, like its parent CARNTON, is not entirely smooth. It may be introduced next year.

I have a great many reds under number, some of which look pretty nice. Most of them are rose-reds, but not all. There are also dark reds and copper reds.

OCCASIONALLY MAKES AN OUTCROSS

In the above breeding now I am mainly staying within my own lines, although occasionally I make an outcross. In the beginning I resolved to use my own things as soon as I had enough. When I started I never would cross two of the same breeder's irises, say two of Dave's, although I would cross Dave's things with Kleinsorge's. Once I established my own strains I have always only crossed things of other people's with one of my own seedlings.

While the above have been major interests, there of course have been minor ones. Since I have used brown and copper blends in breeding for reds and pink blends, it is natural that I should get some of them and sometimes I have followed these up. Also, years ago I got SNOW CRYSTAL, a blue plicata, quite by accident. I was intrigued with it and have followed it up ever since. In the process I got first, BELLE MEADE and then SNOW TRACERY, and I have some seedlings carrying the line on still further. In this breeding I have been trying to get what would practically be a white with

blue styles and a little other blue in the heart of the flower. My variegatas, NASHBOROUGH and BRAVE SHOW, were a sort of byproduct of my red breeding which I have not followed up.

Hybridizing irises is a fascinating game. Just to cross two flowers will fill one with anticipation from the cross to the blooming. How much greater will be the reward to a person who has set a goal and followed it from generation to generation. It is a privilege to honor such a man and to wish for him the satisfaction of achievement.

—GEDDES DOUGLAS

Mr. Douglas, early last year, relinquished the editorship of the Bulletin after 14 years of service. He himself is an outstanding hybridizer of irises.

Occupational Hazard

My corneal epithelium
(The skin of my eye, to speak plain)
Has a bit of a rip
Which was caused by a slip
And occasions a good deal of pain.

The slip I've referred to went this way:
While weeding the iris bed, I
Farsighted indeed,
Was intent on a weed
When a leaf stabbed me right in the eye.

The moral is plain to decipher.
You gardening ladies and lasses
Had better be heeding.
When avidly weeding,
Wear goggles . . . unless you wear glasses.

Envoi

Friends, don't ship me a seeing-eye dog.
I soon will recover my sight,
But I'd surely have lived in perpetual fog
Had I stooped a half inch to the right.

—BETTY WOOD.

(Betty Wood is Mrs. Ira E. Wood, New Providence, New Jersey. The poem was submitted in July 1961.—EDITOR.)

SECTIONS AND AFFILIATES: Please report changes in your presidency as they occur. It is important that the listings in the *Bulletin* be up to date.
—EDITOR.