

Ben Hager

1915 - 1999

BEN HAGER WAS BORN APRIL 1, 1915, IN THE SLEEPY LITTLE MONTEREY County community of Aromas, California. He died May 3, 1999.

Ben spent his pre-adult years in northern San Diego County and Orange County. Once out of school, he began a varied career which included working in restaurants, the designing and making of ceramics, a stint in the army, bee-keeping, and working on a banana boat!

It was while Ben was in the ceramics business in Capistrano Beach that a friend gave him two lug boxes full of irises. The irises were added to a garden occupied by glads and mums. The following year, 1951, he made his first iris crosses. In the spring of 1952 he entered his first iris show, and the year after that he was show chairman! From the show he took pollen of MOLTEN and put in on the iris SAVAGE, which he had won the previous year. The cross yielded FORAY, which was later to be Ben's first tall bearded introduction.

His first taste of commercial iris production came when he went to work for Tom Craig. Then for two years he worked as field manager for Milliken Gardens. At the iris shows Ben had met Sid DuBose. Later, he got Sid a job at Milliken's. When Peg Dabagh told them of an iris garden in Modesto which was for sale, the two men decided to go into partnership. In the fall of 1955 they moved to Modesto and took over the business which Irma Melrose had built. The following spring saw the first catalogue of the "new" Melrose Gardens.

They stayed in Modesto four years, until the property was subdivided and they had to look for new acreage. In the fall of 1959 they moved to the present ten-acre location east of Stockton, where Ben remained until his death, except for a short time when, following Lloyd Austin's death, he helped manage Rainbow Hybridizing Gardens in Placerville.

Ben was well known for his promotion of irises other than tall bearded. He, Sid and Alice White did much to establish the present definition of the Miniature Tall Bearded class. He served on the board of directors for the Siberian and Median Iris Societies, was past president of the Spuria Iris Society and western director for the Reblooming Iris Society.

His goal in iris breeding was to get the top award in each class, and a list of the awards he won (in the following article) substantiates his

intentions. The following articles by Keith Keppel and Philip Edinger provide a more detailed account of Ben Hager's hybridizing achievements and the awards he won.

- *Material gleaned from a Region 14 Bulletin, 1971.*

Chasing the Iris Rainbow

by Keith Keppel, Oregon

Many may dabble with iris pollen, but only a lucky few achieve success in some part of the genus *Iris*. About once every fifty years one of the few perseveres until virtually every major iris group has been mastered. In the latter half of the twentieth century, that one was Benjamin Ross Hager.

Almost ten years ago he wrote, "There is nothing that can bring so much excitement to living as the creative drive. The urge to manipulate some element or group of elements into a new and possibly more satisfactory form can be an occupation of a lifetime. It can be an obsession. Such an obsession has been in charge of my life for the past 40 years..."¹

Ben had all the necessary qualifications for becoming a major breeder. He was intelligent, with an inquiring mind. He kept good records and learned from his own mistakes. He had imagination, envisioning what might happen with the right genetic combination. He had the capacity for hard work, and growing iris seedlings on a large scale *is* hard work. And he was determined (isn't that another word for stubborn?), sticking with a breeding program for many generations before giving up if all came to naught.

He tried various plant forms from time to time. We could mention chrysanthemums and gladiolus from his southern California days, and cannas, then daylilies and daffodils. But irises were his first love, and he would not introduce a daylily at a price higher than an iris, since he felt that irises were superior.

Ben's first iris seedling selections were made in 1953, from crosses made in 1951 on unnamed irises which had been given to him. His bearded iris crosses were numbered consecutively starting in 1953, and these crosses totalled more than 6700 by this spring. Although his first introductions were tall bearded (1961: FORAY and SAVAGE QUEEN), it was with the smaller irises that Ben first gained recognition. The median movement was in full swing, and so were Ben's median breeding projects.

One project was to use the genes of the small tetraploid species

aphylla to breed tetraploid miniature tall bearded. The "table" irises had gained popularity, but there was a rather limited color range in the diploids. In 1966 the tetraploid MTBs SHRINKING VIOLET, ENTR'ACT, EN ROUTE and SCALE MODEL were introduced, "mostly for their breeding potential" according to their introductory blurb. "...the foliage is too large for proportion, the stems are not "flexuous" but of the *aphylla* type, lots of it from the base up on well grown plants, but straight. There is only one bud in each spathe, but there are usually 9 to 11 buds in all." Generations of inbreeding resulted in PUPPY LOVE ('80), a tangerine-bearded pink MTB. Crossing it with his LOUISE HOPPER gave ABRIDGED VERSION, LITTLE ME, LITTLE WHO, and LITTLE YOU. Miniature Tall Bearded breeding was never quite the same after that.

But there were other *aphylla* tangents. The minimizing effect of this species was used to produce miniature dwarfs as well, such as PRODIGY, which in turn gave LIBATION and GIZMO. Coming more up to date we have BUGSY, with an ABRIDGED VERSION sib as an antecedent. And *aphylla* helped keep the intermediates smallish; LOOKIN' GOOD is an IB sib to the MTB LOUISE HOPPER. With the border bearded, PINK BUBBLES and most of the others were basically border bearded and/or tall bearded breeding, but the most recent ones, such as BRAIN CHILD, PAMPERED CHILD, and CUPID SMILES, also carry *aphylla* genes.

Ben also had more conventional lines, of course. The standard dwarf introductions began in 1963 with RICKSHAW and never stopped. Some of the best known of the series are: REGARDS, PEANUTS, PUPPET, DEMON, TEASE, HOCUS POCUS, LOLLIPOP, PEPPER MILL, CHERRY POP, TOASTY, RUSTY DUSTY, BEING BUSY, and FAIRY LORE, but this is just a small sampling of the more than seventy introductions in this class.

Intermediates began with BACK TALK in 1963 and the 1964 introductions DOLL TYPE, INDEED, CHIT CHAT, and GADGET. Ensuing years came with notables like the red-bearded CHEERS, orange-toned WHY NOT and OF COURSE, the violet-bearded pink IMPROVISATION, and the wild tangerine bicolor BLAST. In plicatas, BUTTER PECAN and HOT FUDGE were top of the line in brown and yellow tones, and PIECE OF CAKE was one of the first tangerine plic IBs.

Although Ben started with tall bearded, success seemed slower with that group, and it was nearly ten years after the first introductions before

much of import happened. *Iris balkana* derivative BALKAN GLACIER was a 1968 introduction. The brown-toned TUCSON, a bright yellow SUN WORSHIPER, and BASIC BLACK (sent out the year of introduction complete with strand of faux pearls) were noteworthy in the early seventies, and purple plicata GRAPHIC ARTS came out in 1978, the sib MIRROR IMAGE the year following. Then at last, "lines" started developing and things came faster. VANITY ('75) was the first pink, with next-generation BEVERLY SILLS ('79) and grandchild ANNA BELLE BABSON ('85). Lace and lateness, white to orchid coloration were combined in other lines to give IGLOO, SILVER YEARS, RECHERCHE, SILVER FIZZ and others. Orange lines gave GOOD SHOW, CINDERELLA'S COACH, and FRINGE BENEFITS. Whites and blues started back with ICE SCULPTURE and LEDA'S LOVER and segued on to BIG VALLEY, WELCOME ABOARD, BIG SKY (he liked his borders small, but his talls big), DRUM ROLL, KATHLEEN KAY NELSON, TINTED CRYSTAL, RITE OF SPRING, et al. There was the third Dykes Medal winner EDITH WOLFORD, and his very recent, very excellent POEM OF ECSTASY and CHASING RAINBOWS.

Remontancy was sought after with success. MOTHER EARTH, SUNNY SHOULDERS, WINDS OF CHANGE, CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS, AUTUMN CIRCUS and RECURRING DREAM are but a few of the rebloomers to come from the Hager seedling patch. Ben was also on the lookout for novelties, and HORNY LORRI, JESTER and TRIPLE WHAMMY are three of his space agers.

Being in close contact with Jonnye Rich, it is no wonder that he tried his hand at breeding arilbreds. SHEIK was the first to be introduced, in 1976, with HOWDAH, KIOSK, ONLOOKER, and SULTAN'S JEWELRY a few of those from later years.

The first of the spuria crosses was made in 1955. While working at Milliken Gardens in southern California, Ben saw the sensational WADI ZEM ZEM; it was there that he made the cross that produced ELIXIR, which along with ESSAY and NEOPHYTE were his first (1964) spuria introductions. The extent of Ben's involvement with spuria crossing can only be realized when looking at the breeding books; some 1100 different crosses are recorded, which resulted in about 60 introductions. A sampling of the sixty includes CONNOISEUR, ARCHIE OWEN, MARILYN HOLLOWAY, CLARKE COSGROVE, EAGLE, FAR OUT, ILA CRAWFORD, DIMINUENDO, and FUTURE PERFECT.

Japanese iris crossing was another matter. Early crosses at Melrose Gardens in Modesto fell victim as the Melrose ranch was being subdivided. In Ben's notes: "#1 through 47 lost to bulldozer. Got \$200.00 for them." Not without a fight with the insurance company! In 1961 after the move to Stockton, the crosses continued, with J50 as the first recorded and the cross that yielded TENDER TRAP, the first of his JI introductions (1965). 110 more crosses were listed by the nineties. STRANGER IN PARADISE ('70) won the 1976 Payne Award.

About 150 Louisiana crosses were made. DELTA KING was the first introduction, in 1968, followed in later years by MARY DUNN, FULL ECLIPSE, SHRIMP LOUIS, and others.

The year 1968 also saw the first of the Siberian iris introductions: RUBY WINE and SPARKLING ROSÉ. About 110 crosses were made successfully over the years, with SWANK, CHILLED WINE, STARSTEPS, THESPIAN, and JAYBIRD among the results.

Pacific Coast Natives are not easy to grow in the hot interior valleys of California. Still, Ben tried, and one introduction - AROMAS - was introduced by Bay View Gardens in 1971. Aromas is the name of the little northern California town where Ben was born.

Even inter-species beardless seedlings might show up in the field. ROY DAVIDSON WAS INTRODUCED IN 1987; PHIL EDINGER in 1991.

The influence of Hager irises can be seen readily by scanning the parentages printed in the registration records. Trace back the trees beyond the immediate parents and find even more Hager influence. Ben once wrote an article for the BULLETIN called Shoulders.² It was a review of all the varieties found in the family tree of BEVERLY SILLS, and a roll call of the breeders who produced those irises. He showed how we current breeders are "standing on the shoulders" of those who went before us; we could not be where we are today without them.

We are now standing on the shoulders of Benjamin Ross Hager, and they are very broad shoulders indeed.

¹ BAIS 278, July 1990 - p. 8.

² BAIS 278, July 1990 - pp. 8-11.

The Pot of Gold (and Silver, and Bronze...)

by Philip Edinger, California

It has been said that Virtue is its own reward. Few, though, would challenge the notion that awards are quite an encouragement to continuing Virtuous endeavors.

For Ben Hager, the omnivorous iris breeder, awards were many and varied...and encouraging. In fact, it is safe to say that no other iris hybridizer, past or present, has pursued breeding in so many areas of the genus *Iris* and has received awards to acknowledge excellence in all such areas. From the smallest pumilas to the largest tall bearded, from arilbreds to siberians to spurias to Pacific Coast natives to miscellaneous species, he tackled it all with gusto and subsequent acclaim. Only bulbous irises, crested irises, and junos escaped his pollinating brush; and had they been easier growers in California's central valley (or viable commercial prospects), even they would not have been left untouched. He said it in jest, but it was oh-so-true: that if it stood still long enough, he'd pollinate it!

No better testament to the Hager hybridizing career exists than a compendium of awards granted to his irises and to him. For the record, and as a tribute, these awards appear here *in toto*. And yet...even this list will surely be rendered incomplete over the next ten years, as his recent introductions and introductions-to-be continue to be officially recognized as superior irises.

One point should assert itself as you take in the sheer volume of these awards: that it is physically impossible for one person to accomplish this alone. Equal credit really is due long time partner and indefatigable field worker/manager Sid DuBose who from the outset saw to it that fields were readied for timely planting, that plants were watered and weeded and grown superbly for prompt evaluation. Decades of this ongoing field work allowed the raising of countless thousands of seedlings from which these awarded irises represent the pick of the collective litter.

Awards—American Iris Society:

note: recipients of awards higher than HM have received all requisite lower awards and are therefore listed only in their highest-status categories.

Dykes Memorial Medal:

VANITY (1982)
BEVERLY SILLS (1985)
EDITH WOLFORD (1993)

Knowlton Medal (BB):

PINK BUBBLES (1986)

Hans and Jacob Sass Medal (IB):

SWIZZLE (1979)
BUTTER PECAN (1991)
HOT FUDGE (1992)

Cook-Douglas Medal (SDB):

REGARDS (1973)

HOCUS POCUS (1981)

Caparne-Welch Medal (MDB):

GIZMO (1987)

DITTO (1988)

Clarence G. White Medal (AB):

KALIFA'S ROBE (1998)

Eric Nies Medal (Spu):

COUNTESS ZEPPELIN (1997)

Award of Merit (and AM equivalent awards):

Tall Bearded: ANNA BELLE BABSON, FRINGE BENEFITS, GOOD SHOW, HORATIO, ICE SCULPTURE, KATHLEEN KAY NELSON, LEDA'S LOVER, SILVER YEARS, TIMESCAPE, TRIPLE WHAMMY

Border Bearded: SOMETHING SPECIAL

Intermediate: CHEERS, OF COURSE

Standard Dwarf: ABRACADABRA, CLAP HANDS, CLAY'S CAPER, DEMON, PEPPER MILL, PUPPET

Miniature Dwarf: BITSY, BUGSY, CURIO, FLEA CIRCUS, LIBATION, THREE CHERRIES, TINY APRICOT, TINY CHERUB

Miniature Tall Bearded: ABRIDGED VERSION, NEW IDEA

Arilbred: COOL OASIS, DUNE, HUMOHR, SHEIK, SULTAN'S JEWELRY

Interspecies: PHIL EDINGER

Japanese: STRANGER IN PARADISE

Louisiana: CAJUN COUNTRY, DELTA KING, FULL ECLIPSE, MARY DUNN

Siberian: CHILLED WINE, JAYBIRD, OMAR'S CUP, SWANK

Spuria: ARCHIE OWEN, CLARKE COSGROVE, CONNOISSEUR, DESTINATION, DRESS CIRCLE, ELIXIR, ILA CRAWFORD, ILA REMEMBERED, IN DEPTH, MARILYN HOLLOWAY, PORT OF CALL

Honorable Mention:

Tall Bearded: AFTER THE BALL, AMAZON BRIDE, AUTUMN CIRCUS, BALKAN GLACIER, BASIC BLACK, BEL CANTO, BIG VALLEY, BOUNTIFUL HARVEST, BURNING COALS, CALM SEA, CINDERELLA'S COACH, CRYSTAL CATHEDRAL, DARK RITUAL, DAVY JONES, DECOLLETAGE, DRUM ROLL, FANFARON, FOOLISH FANCY, FRAGRANT LILAC, GLAD RAGS, GOOD GUY, GRAPHIC ARTS, GRATUITY, HORNY LORRI, IGLOO, IN PERSON, LARK ASCENDING, LA VALSE, MAGIC, MELBA HAMBLÉN, MIRROR IMAGE, MOON'S DELIGHT, MUCHAS GRACIAS, MUCH

OBLIGED, MY VALENTINE, NEPTUNE'S CLOAK, PLEASURE DOME, POEM OF ECSTASY, PRESTIGE ITEM, RECHERCHÉ, RED LION, RITE OF SPRING, SILVER FLOW, SPACE ODYSSEY, STOLEN DREAMS, SUNNY SHOULDERS, SUN WORSHIPER, TOTAL RECALL, TUCSON, VERISMO, WINDS OF CHANGE, WORLD CLASS, YVONNE B. BURKE

Border Bearded: AUDACIOUS, LACY LASSO, STAR CHILD

Intermediate: ALL RIGHT, BACK TALK, BLAST, BRIGHTEN UP, CHIT CHAT, DARKNESS, DOLL TYPE, FIDDLE FADDLE, INDEED, LOOKIN' GOOD, PIECE OF CAKE, PONY, POT LUCK, SVELTE, THREE DOLLARS, TRIO, WHY NOT

Standard Dwarf: ACE OF CLUBS, APRIL FOOL, AXIOM, BEING BUSY, CHERRY POP, COMBO, CRYSTAL BUBBLES, FAD, FRISBEES, GARDEN FAVORITE, HAPPENING, IDOL'S EYE, KITTEN CAPERS, LEMON TANG, LOLLIPOP, MONKEY, MUSIC BOX, MY SHEBA, ORNAMENT, PEANUTS, PLAY MISTY, POPCORN, RHINESTONE, RICKSHAW, SILKIE, SPANGLES, TEASE, WHIM, WUNDERKIND

Miniature Dwarf: BLUETWEEN, DOODLE, DRAGONS IN AMBER, DUMPLING, FOOTLIGHTS, GEM, GREY PEARLS, HOT FOOT, KID STUFF, MACUMBA, MINI COQUETTE, PETTY CASH, PRODIGY

Miniature Tall Bearded: DINKY, EN ROUTE, ENTR'ACT, GUMDROPS, LITTLE ME, LITTLE WHO, LITTLE YOU, LOUISE HOPPER, NEW WAVE, PUPPY LOVE, SCALE MODEL, SHRINKING VIOLET, TING-A-LING

Arilbred: BARELYMOHR, BURRA SAHIB, DESERT DIAMOND, DESERT PLUM, KIOSK, KUZA-NAMA, ONLOOKER, TURKESTAN, TURKISH FEZ, TURKISH TANGENT, ZERZURA

Japanese: DAWN HORIZONS, TENDER TRAP

Louisiana: CAJUN COUNTRY, DARK TIDE, DELTA SUNSHINE, SHRIMP LOUIS

Pacific Coast Native: AROMAS, PACIFIC MOON

Siberian: ALTER EGO, INNOCENT EGO, CABERNET, OTHER WORLDS, PINK SPARKLE, ROSE QUEST, RUBY WINE, SPARKLE, SPARKLING ROSÉ, STAR CLUSTER, STAR GLITTER, STARSTEPS, THESPIAN

Spuria: AIRY FANCY, AMBITION, ARTS ALIVE, CHOCOLATE DIP, COPPER TRIDENT, CUSTOM DESIGN, DIMINUENDO, DRAGON RIDER, EAGLE, ESSAY, ELAN VITAL, ELEANOR HILL, FABLE, FAROLITO, FAR OUT, FIRST FRUITS, FIXED STAR, FOLLOW THROUGH, GILDED CHALICE, GUEST ARTIST, HEADWAY, JUBILANT SPIRIT, LOOK LIVELY, MARITIMA GEM, MEDIA LUZ, MEGATREND, NEOPHYTE, NOW THIS, OBJET D'ART, PERFECT SPRING, PING AND PANG, PROTÉGÉ, SARONG, SMALL PACKAGE, SPRING REVERIE, SUSPENSE, TRANSFIGURATION, WOODWIND, ZAMBOANGA

Walther Cup (greatest votes for HM):

BEVERLY SILLS (1981), LEDA'S LOVER (1982)

Franklin Cook Cup (favorite out-of-region convention guest):

SILVER YEARS (1985)

President's Cup (favorite in-region convention guest):

EDITH WOLFORD (1986)

Overseas Awards:**Austria (International Competition for Short Irises, Vienna):**

1976 Silver Medal, IB: SWIZZLE

1979 Gold Medal, SDB: CLAP HANDS

1979 Bronze Medal, IB: POT LUCK

1981 Bronze Medal, IB: LOOKIN' GOOD

1983 Bronze Medal, IB: OF COURSE

England (Wisley Trials):

Award of Merit (1989): PROTÉGÉ (Spuria)

France (International Iris Competition, Orleans, 1978):

Spuria competition: CLARKE COSGROVE (first prize), SARONG (second prize), ARCHIE OWEN (third prize)

Siberian competition: SWANK (first prize)

Silver Medal:

most important and diversified individual foreign contribution

Silver Medal collection: Dwarf irises

Silver Medal collection: Intermediate Bearded irises

Silver Medal collection: Siberian irises

Herbaceous Plant Lover's Prize (for advances in new breeding directions):
DEMON (SDB)

Germany (IGA 1973, Hamburg):

Silver Medal: DARK RITUAL

Italy (Il Concorso Internazionale dell'Iris, Firenze):

Premio Firenze: BEVERLY SILLS (1981)

Premio Adriana Gardi: SOMETHING SPECIAL (1981)

City of Florence Prize (best red): IMMOLATION (1977)

Garden Club Cup (best garden variety): EDITH WOLFORD (1988)

Personal Awards and Honors:

American Iris Society: Hybridizer's Medal (1973)

American Iris Society: Distinguished Service Medal (1985)

British Iris Society: Foster Memorial Plaque (1981)