

# 10 Questions

## for an AIS Convention Chairman & Her Husband

BY MARILYN KAPLAN, CALIFORNIA



Bonnie Nichols is the chairman for not one, but two consecutive AIS conventions in Dallas, Texas. I heard her speak at the 2012 Convention in Ontario, California and knew instantly how much she put her heart and soul into these projects, along with husband and fellow irisarian Hooker Nichols.

I do need to give members some vital information. Bonnie and Hooker were introduced at, what else, an iris meeting! They soon found out their birth due dates were the same day! But Hooker, born prematurely, beat out Bonnie by several weeks. This dynamic duo makes a wonderfully supportive couple and I thoroughly enjoyed getting to know them.

**Q:** *What is your favorite tall bearded iris and why?*

**Bonnie:** The iris that Hooker named for my mom is my favorite TB. ‘Dorothy Devenport’ (Nichols, 2003) is always the early welcome of iris bloom season. The iris is ruffled in peach and apricot tones with a tangerine beard. Hooker has sent guest plants of this variety throughout the United States and overseas. My sweet mother passed away in 1994 from cancer. She never had the financial means to travel much. Now her iris travels for her. Every time I see it in bloom, I know my mom is smiling back at me.

**Hooker:** ‘Fluted Haven’ (Reynolds, 1958). This was the first iris I can recall that really caught my attention, blooming in the garden of my aunt Theda Clark who helped raise me. I was so intrigued by the huge green seed pods and the multiple, branched stalks. Picking the pods too early and presenting them to my aunt did not make for a good day as a child. Today it still ranks as one of the finest white irises ever hybridized. The heavy substance and ruffled flowers impress any irisarian who sees it blooming.

**Q:** *If you weren’t convention chairman for two consecutive years, what would you be doing in the spare time?*

**Bonnie:** I would be planting more irises. I have always grown irises. I remember as a little girl taking care of my flowers as many of us do. We also grow a number of daylilies to extend our flowering season.

**Hooker:** Hybridizing bearded irises and daylilies has taken second place as preparations have been made to present two consecutive national iris conventions. I have managed to create an extensive baseline for my Louisiana hybridizing endeavors. One interesting sideline is the creation of a Species-X line involving Louisiana X *Iris tectorum* seedlings.

**Q:** *Tell us something about you that others may not know.*

**Bonnie:** I love all types of unusual flowers—double clematis, peppermint zinnias, plicata morning glories, variegated roses, spider daylilies. If it is broken colored, I want to grow it!

**Hooker:** I played trombone in elementary, middle, and high school. I was in the university jazz band for over three years. Our family has researched its roots. Lady Godiva was a maternal grandmother and King Charlemagne is also in our background.

**Q:** *Hooker, you prefer garden judging while Bonnie prefers exhibition judging. Do you debate the situation?*

**Hooker:** The preference is never debated. Both of us tell our iris friends why we prefer one type of judging over the other. Bonnie has always had a fondness for advancing exhibition judging techniques. She loves to mentor new irisarians on the subject of exhibition judging. Specimen selection and show preparation are principles that need to be perfected and continually upgraded. I, on the other hand, mentor new judging students on the basics of good garden judging. Examining the whole plant takes a lot of practice both from the view of a hybridizer, as well as, from the view of the basic gardener.

**Q:** *At convention, will you serve food specific to the region that members will long remember?*

**Bonnie:** If you come to Texas it is a given that Mexican food will be on the menu. We will be serving steak and chicken fajitas for one of our bus tour lunches. Another day will be Babe’s fried chicken. Babe’s chicken is great, but the mashed potatoes, green beans, creamed corn and homemade biscuits rule! To stay within our budget, I had to give up either the salad or banana pudding and peach cobbler. Wasn’t a tough decision comparing lettuce to cobbler!

**Hooker:** People at a convention will forgive the hosts for many unavoidable problems except buses which break down and horrible food. I have never met an iris lover who didn’t like to eat. Most convention attendees will sample the food and liquid refreshments before they go out to the garden to see flowers. People will enjoy the refreshments we are serving and the banquet meals will be memorable.

**Q:** *Hooker, other flowers have faded from memory, but irises have stayed with you since you were five years old. What was your favorite iris then and do you have it in your garden now?*

**Hooker:** ‘Snow Goddess’ (Becherer 1955) could be found in numerous clumps in my first personal garden. I still grow it and incorporate it into some of my breeding programs.

**Q:** *We all know Bonnie is a fireball of energy. Do you parlay that energy into any other activities?*

**Hooker:** Bonnie has the unique ability to multitask her endeavors. She is very active in our church and loves to go antiquing. I get her to help me plant over 1,000 onions each spring in the Mesquite garden. She hates separating the onions as much as the baby bearded and beardless irises from the nursery pots!

**Q:** *I understand you have over 1000 Louisiana guest irises. What makes Texas soil so ideal for growing Louisiana irises?*

**Hooker:** We enjoy over 300+ days of frost-free weather. Once the LA seedlings are transferred to 1-gallon plastic pots, they are fed Miracle-Gro® liquid fertilizer on a weekly program. By September, the plants are small clumps, tapped out and planted directly into the ground. Next spring, I get nearly 100 percent bloom.

**Q:** *In your travels, where would your dream vacation be?*

**Bonnie:** That's easy. I want to see Tahiti and the Netherlands! When I approached our travel agent she said "you know those are two very different types of places to visit." I love the ocean and the serene beauty that Tahiti offers; however, I also love the fantastic flowers of the Netherlands. As a little girl I traveled in my mind there to see the tulips and daffodils every time a catalog would arrive in the mailbox. I will get to both places—after the 2014 AIS convention.

**Hooker:** I want to travel throughout Europe and ride across Russia on the Trans-Siberian Express. A trip to Australia and New Zealand is also in the works.

**Q:** *At convention, what can members expect to see that is unique to your uncles' Botanical garden 100 miles west of Dallas?*

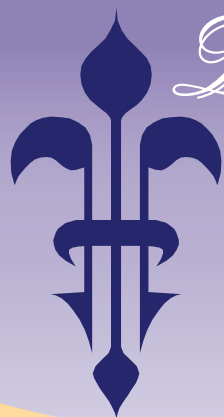
**Bonnie:** Convention friends will be amazed that even though Texas is hot and can be very dry, both native and nonnative plants coexist magnificently—mesquite trees and roses; cacti and irises.

**Q:** *You are both hybridizers. Why the trend toward Louisiana irises?*

**Bonnie:** Money is the reason we are moving toward hybridizing more Louisianas. Here in Texas a nurseryman can sell every available Louisiana iris to gardeners.

**Q:** *Approximately how many guest irises were mailed to you?*

**Bonnie:** We received over 1100 different varieties of irises from Siberians to arilbreds, medians, Louisiana, and spurias. Over 4000 plants are in the 2013 convention gardens. Another 1000 guests arrived for the 2014 convention. ❖



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