



An Iris Lover:
John Weiler, Ph.D

BY JANET SMITH, CALIFORNIA

I HAD THE PRIVILEGE OF MEETING DR. JOHN WEILER DURING THE APRIL 1991 SPRING IRIS SHOW OF THE FRESNO IRIS SOCIETY. His wealth of knowledge inspired me to want more so I joined the Fresno Iris Society that he founded in 1967. I consider this man a walking encyclopedia. Anything you want to know about irises and plants—ask John Weiler.

John's love of irises and plants began at an early age growing up in Lincoln, Nebraska and has never stopped. "My interest in plants goes back as much as I can remember. I took a teacher in Kindergarten a bouquet out of the garden". With irises it began when he was a senior in high school. "For two dollars I bought a collection of eight irises." Among those eight were H.P. Sass's tetraploid innovations 'Siegfried' (1936) and 'Tiffany' (1931). Shortly after John planted them, he went into the service during World War II. By the time he got out, those little plants had grown into great big clumps. When he saw the marvelous increase that had occurred during his absence, John saw dollar signs as well as beauty dangling in front of his eyes. He was hooked. But it wasn't until he got out of the military and was working in the meat packing industry that he "slipped into it backwards" and decided he could make a living working with plants.

"I like plants and people, and after I got an education I was able to do both," he said. John received his doctoral degree in botany from University of California at Berkley in 1962. Shortly after, Dr. Weiler moved his family to Fresno and began his teaching career at California State University – Fresno (Fresno State). For the next 27 years he taught botany, ornamental horticulture, plant science and landscape design.

It was in 1949 when he began breeding irises for color, vigor and improvements in general, releasing his first hybrids to commerce in 1977 through his Rialto Gardens. "I wanted to develop strains that bloomed longer, were fancier, and had new colors. It was an avocation that became almost an invocation. I started making almost as much money as teaching," he said.

An article in the Fresno Bee, May 1996 begins "The only hint of what lies behind John Weiler's ranch-style home is a small pot next to the drive. Next to the pink geraniums, Persian buttercups and white and coral African Watsonia, there's the commercially grown 'Starlite Blue', 'Golden Galaxy', 'Fresno Calypso' and 'Thick and Creamy', to name a few of the garden hybrids of iris that can still be seen blooming." Visitors should not judge the garden on

the front yard alone. The backyard boasts a collection of 400 species of succulents from all over the world, a large tray collection of bedding plants in another section and 700 varieties of irises. John closed Rialto Gardens in 1993 reflecting "I had already retired once, and I couldn't handle it all by myself. So I decided to sell and sold all the stock."

By 2000, John had introduced 88 irises; 49 tall bearded, 36 medians, two Pacific Coast irises, and one Species-X. Of those 88 introductions, 45 were Reblowers. John feels that his 'Fresno Calypso' (1978), a TB, is one of his top accomplishments—a pure orange. He has won many awards over the years including the AIS Hybridizer's Medal in 2004 and the Distinguished Service Award from the Reblooming Iris Society.

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Friends can recall with great delight the many questions John would answer for them without hesitation. One recalled of asking if a particular species of iris could still be found in the Sierra's. John gave him directions without missing a beat. It does not matter if you are a friend or stranger; John loves to talk about plants. Several years ago John and I were walking across a lawn at the Fresno State campus headed towards the Horticulture Department. John proceeded to tell me about every single plant we walked past. To him there were no weeds, just misplaced plants.

At 86 years of age, he walks slower. But ask him any question about irises in particular and you'll be enlightened for hours—just so long as you join him for a cup of tea. ♣