

# Virginia 2003: **We Saw the Stars**

by Robert Strohman, Kentucky

**B**UTTONS PROMOTING THE 2003 AIS NATIONAL CONVENTION exhorted everyone to “come see the stars.”

Not the customary number of iris fans (pun intended) made their way to Virginia to see the stars of irisdom in the seven tour gardens (to be reviewed individually in the October issue of the *Bulletin*) – around 300, I heard – about half the usual number who attend. Those who made the trip enjoyed a treat – several of them, in fact – from the irises themselves to the venues where they were growing.

In a spring when the entire eastern half of our nation had more than enough rain, northern Virginia in May was no exception. Rain either fell on iris tourists (irists?) or was threatening to fall in every garden we visited. Even so, no one minded. Jackets were donned, umbrellas popped up, and everything went as scheduled.

We went south to the Fredericksburg area and northwest to Cross Junction, a span of one hundred miles. Among bearded irises, even though the weather was cool, there was no shortage of bloom in every class (yes, even in MDBs and arils). Bloom was so bountiful that it was hard to believe that the bearded guests were just two-year clumps.

MTB stars that dazzled came from all across the country. From New England came Stephanie Markham’s LARRY’S GIRL (‘02) with at least thirty stalks per clump wherever it grew, and Lucy Burton’s ELFIN SHADOWS (‘04), with just as many stalks, each bearing three open blooms. Similar numbers were found in the Nebraska MTB PUG (Kalkwarf ‘01). From Arkansas came Ken Fisher’s SIREN (‘00), from Virginia Clarence Mahan’s REMINISCENCE (‘94), and from Kentucky Hugh Thurman’s MADAM PRESIDENT (‘01), all demanding – and receiving – lots of deserved attention. Everywhere the MTBs outdid themselves. But they were not alone.

As for beardless irises, there were guest plants and permanent residents of virtually every sort. (Well, admittedly there weren’t any PCNs, but none were expected.) Some Schafer/Sacks Siberians that

impressed were TOM SCHAEFER ('00), WHITE AMBER ('01), and BANISH MISFORTUNE ('99). Banish misfortune indeed; just looking at them was enough to do that! The German inter-species SIBTOSA DUCHESS (Tamberg '02) was another kind of star.

Among tall bearded stars, the record-holder for most prolific bloom must surely have been Hooker Nichols' pale orange self DOROTHY DEVENPORT ('03) at Winterberry Gardens, where I stopped counting at fifty stalks! The on-again-off-again rain served as a test of a variety's ability to withstand the weather; old favorites and new ones did not disappoint. Standing tall through it all were POND LILY (E. Jones '95), SKY AND SUN (Spoon '99), SLOVAK PRINCE (Mego '03), AS YOU WERE (Stahly '01), AMIABLE (Ghio '02), and BADITUDE (Burseen '01). And others, as they say, too numerous to mention.

As well as discovering new favorite irises in the tour gardens, during the bus rides *en route* one had time to renew old friendships and to make new ones. In my own case, I got to know Angie Fierro, Delores Armenta, and Tina Macias, three lovely sisters from southern California. Their mission was to find the guest variety named SISTERS THREE (Hedgecock '99). Finally, in the last garden on the last day, it was found – a beautiful self of palest blue.

Conventioneers were asked, as always, to name their favorites from among all they'd seen. When the votes for favorite out-of-host-region variety were tallied, one of last year's runners-up in Memphis had moved to first place as SPLASHACATA (Tasco '98) won the Franklin Cook Memorial Cup.

There were eight hybridizers with fifty-eight varieties contending for the President's Cup as favorite Region 4-originated variety. As it turned out, Don Spoon swept all three top spots: DAUGHTER OF STARS ('01) was third; MTB Maslon ('02) was second; and MY GINNY ('00), named for his lovely wife, won the President's Cup.

Convention Chairman Clarence Mahan asked all those who would write about this Convention to make it clear to non-attendees how much they missed, something that I would have done in any case. It's too bad that more people didn't "come see the stars." Those who did found them – in spite of the rain – shining brightly. 