

# Baton Rouge Botanic Garden

## The Iris and Wetland Garden, an enduring contribution of Joe Mertzweiller

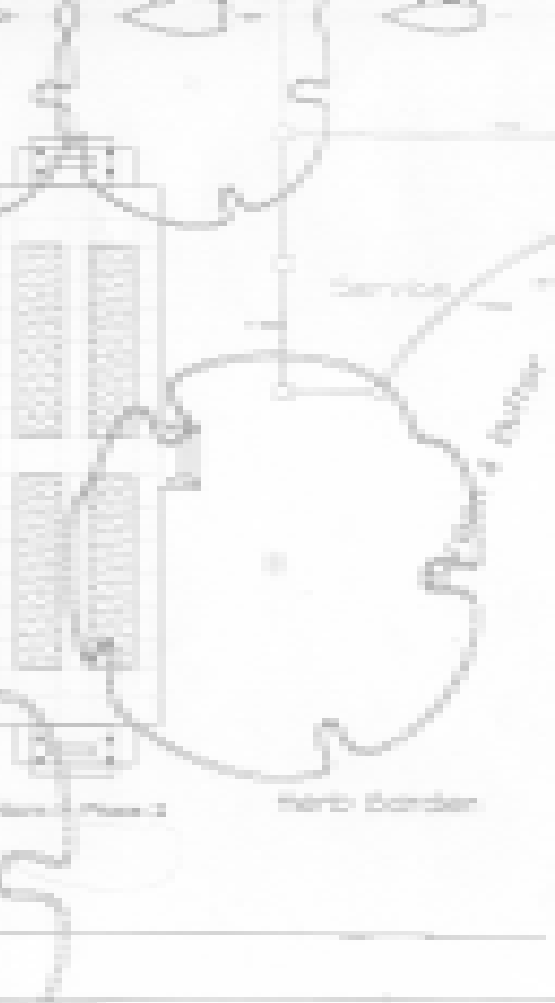
*The gorgeous and growing public garden in the city's Independence Park is the site of a major public display of Louisiana irises, and the fitting location of Joe Mertzweiller's introductions.*



*Joseph K. Mertzweiller*

Public display gardens featuring Louisiana irises are all too rare, and, until the late Joe Mertzweiller got involved, South Louisiana was missing from the list entirely. Now, thanks to the support of the Baton Rouge Recreation and Parks Commission (BREC), to Joe's vision and energy, and to the continuing help of his friends, that omission has been remedied, and in fine style. The newly developed Iris and Wetland Garden at the BREC Independence Park Botanic Garden displays Louisiana irises in a fashion that would make Joe Mertzweiller, and the entire Society, proud indeed.

BREC does not formally name sections of its 14-acre Botanic



construction in Phase One was complete, the irises put on a show! Beautiful bloom on healthy plants in a pretty and wholly accessible setting.

### **The Development of the Iris Garden**

The Iris and Wetland Garden did not spring up overnight. Joe Mertzweiller was involved in the Botanic Garden from the beginning as a representative of SLI, but its present state of development came only after several years of effort and initial steps that did not work out as planned. The original concept was to grow the irises in a natural-appearing pond to be created on the site. That pond was dug and planted in early 1994 with an estimated 1,000 rhizomes, many of which were donated by Marie Caillet from her garden in Little Elm, Texas. Joe supervised that planting, which was completed with the help of high school students, and he later wrote in the first issue of the Botanic Garden's newsletter that the irises "will be mostly advanced generation hybrids." He added that in future plantings which would bring the total to at least 3,000 irises, the "species and early hybrids will be represented as well."

Art Landry, an avid camellia grower and the current Treasurer and a past-President of the Friends of the Botanic Garden, said that the original pond planting did not work well for a number of reasons. Control of the weeds, both along the banks and in the water itself was a constant problem. Art wrote in the Friends' newsletter that the "water level varied with the rainfalls and dry periods, and did not control the weeds. The irises planted in the pond bloomed fine for us the two years they were there, but could only be seen from the bank and only if you walked up to the pond."

### **New Approach**

It was decided to replace the unworkable pond with a series of beds designed for ease of access and maintenance, as well as an attractive display of the irises. By this time Joe Mertzweiller was ill, but he participated in the planning of the redesigned garden. Ted Jack, then a landscape architect for BREC, created the current Master Plan, drawing in part upon Joe's ideas and upon the work of Rebecca Deubler, who, while a student at LSU in Landscape Architecture, did her final design project on the Louisiana iris

Garden, but in the Spring, hopefully on the weekend of the SLI meeting in Lafayette, plans call for the dedication of the Iris Garden to Joe and the placement of a sign or plaque noting that it is the site of the Joe Mertzweiller iris collection. At present, the Garden grows Joe's irises predominantly, although over time the cultivars of other hybridizers will be added to provide a display of the wide range of irises that he envisioned.

A master plan for the development of the Iris and Wetland Garden is in Phase One of implementation. The current configuration consists of paved walks through a lowered area, berms for transitional plants, a pond feature, benches, and lots of Louisiana irises planted in curving beds. A short distance away, across an open space to be developed in Phase Two, "experimental beds" are laid out in rows. A watering system is in place, and beds are not so wide that maintenance is excessively difficult. And, in spring of 1999, the first bloom season after



*Recessed iris beds, a raised pond and paved walkways replaced the old pond, which required excessive maintenance.*



*Art Landry and James Jeansonne, mainstays in the effort to develop the Iris and Wetland Garden.*

garden.

Construction of the Iris Garden in accordance with Phase One of the new Master Plan began in March 1998, with funding provided in part by a generous grant from Freeport-McMoran. BREC oversaw the construction. Norris Petrie, a construction supervisor for BREC who was especially enthusiastic and helpful, has become an iris grower himself.

The first step was the creation of four experimental beds which permitted the testing of different soil mixes and which provided transitional space needed to move the irises from the old pond. The pond was converted to sunken beds with paved walkways. According to a description of the plan, the design of this area is based on “the meandering land



*A bed of mixed irises taken from the original pond planting developed by Joe Mertzweiller.*

forms of sloughs in South Louisiana. The bottom of the slough will serve as both a walkway and beds for wetland plants. The highland areas above the sloughs will feature vegetation typical of natural levees....”

The test beds were completed in April 1998 and the original irises were moved from the pond in late April

and early May. The sunken beds were planted in Fall 1998 with irises from Joe’s garden that were donated by Helene Mertzweiller.

#### **Phase Two**

The Iris and Wetland Garden already is an excellent place to see Louisiana irises, but the second phase will result in significant additional development. The Master Plan calls for an open air pavilion, additional paved walkways, fencing, and about half of the anticipated total planting space. Art Landry wrote of the design that the “pavilion will serve as a focal point to view and enjoy the garden as well as a gathering place and outdoor classroom for groups of children or gardening society members.” Phase Two of the Iris and Wetland Garden will result both in significant expansion in area and the addition of features that will magnify the versatility and functionality of the site for the public.

Efforts have begun to raise the needed funding for Phase Two, but, with a \$150,000 price tag, it is a major project. The

Botanic Garden generates some funds through plant sales, and BREC provides significant in-kind support and other valuable assistance. However, the magnitude of Phase Two will require outside support from a corporation or other major donor.

The plant sales will continue, however, both to raise funds and to make Louisiana irises more widely available in the community. James Jeansonne and Mark Hofmeyer have made crosses and

***“The LA Irises are coming into full bloom and are really a sight to behold! James Jeansonne, with the help of Wilson Beard and others, has done an outstanding job in planting, fertilizing, mulching, and weeding the irises this spring. The plants have responded with a riot of color from whites, yellows, blues, lavenders, reds, purples and all shades in-between....”***

-Botanic Garden Newsletter

produced seedlings for the sale, much as Joe did earlier, both for the Botanic Garden and for SLI auctions. At the Spring 1998 sale nearly 400 hundred available seedlings sold out in 45 minutes. Another sale was scheduled for the Fall, and eventually named cultivars will be available.

#### **The Long Haul**

Aside from new development, the major task facing the Iris and Wetland Garden is the maintenance, organization and expansion of the iris plantings. That is no small challenge. To date, the Garden has been blessed with several dedicated volunteers who were friends that Joe Mertzweiller had interested in Louisiana irises.



*Gazebos in the Rose Garden, viewed from beyond an "experimental bed" in the Iris and Wetland Garden.*

James Jeansonne, who is also an orchid grower and hybridizer, has taken the lead in working with the irises and attempting to identify the various cultivars. The plants that Joe had placed in the old pond had become mixed, and there was no clear record of what was in the original planting. The irises donated by Helene were marked in her yard with coded tags, and that has enabled James to decipher the identity some, but by no means all, of the plants.

In 1999, James took a raft of pictures which he organized into books with the



*Two beautiful irises that may be identified in time.*

hope of later identifying the cultivars. Because a large proportion of the original plants probably were seedlings that varied only marginally from others and from the parents, this is a difficult process. Many undoubtedly will never be identified, although there are lovely

flowers among them, some probably worthy of registration and introduction.

At the present time, several cultivars donated by Frank Zachariah are labeled and more will be tagged by the next bloom season as the result of James' work. Eventually, it is hoped that all of Joe Mertzweiller's registered irises will be represented in clearly identified plantings. Art Landry wrote, "We will try to obtain plants of all of Joe's introductions from other growers throughout the South so that his tremendous contributions to Louisiana irises can be remembered in the years to come."

### Looking Ahead

Louisiana iris enthusiasts have been aware of the growing popularity of their favorite flower, and the feeling is widely shared that we are on the threshold of another major advance. Public plantings such those at the Iris and Wetland Garden in Baton Rouge may well serve as a catalyst for the next surge into public awareness. Visitors who dropped by the garden on October 4th would have seen some of the reasons: James Jeansonne, Art Landry, Mark Hofmeyer and Wilson Beard in the process of digging and replanting the experimental beds and surrounded by masses of huge Louisiana iris rhizomes, many over a foot long. Visitors to the Iris and Wetland Garden in the spring are bound to see a gorgeous display produced by the replanted irises, the result of good breeding, good culture and goodwill.

Joe Mertzweiller did not live to see the construction of the new Iris and Wetland Garden, but the vision was his. Today, the result of Joe's work, both in the irises and the garden itself, is there for the entire community to see and appreciate.

## Independence Park Botanic Garden

Independence Park originally was the Parish Airport but has been transformed since the late 1970s into a multi-use recreation area by the East Baton Rouge Parish Recreation and Park Commission, BREC. The last plane flew out of the airport in 1974. The site now serves as a home to the Parish Library, a Louisiana Department of Public Safety Complex and a public recreation facility, including numerous soccer fields. A



Garden Center Building is a main resource of the Park, a place where city garden clubs, horticultural organizations and interested citizens meet, hold flower shows and conduct special garden events.

The iris display is the fourth major garden area within the Botanic Garden. The others are the Rose, Crape Myrtle, and Sensory Gardens. The Sensory Garden contains herbs, culinary and other plants. A Camellia Garden is planned, and detailed design is underway.



*Above: unidentified deep yellow; top: blue with nicely marked, frilly styles; Right, bottom: short peach-rose seedling; top: fluted pink with distinctive styles.*

## **Botanic Garden Mysteries**



*Above: full red with striking signals; top: rusty peach with ruffles, good form and no known pedigree.*

# **HELP NEEDED**

## **Volunteers**

SLI members and others in the Baton Rouge area are invited to volunteer to help with the Iris and Wetland Garden at Independence Park. In the long run, the success of the Garden in the community will depend upon a healthy volunteer cadre to supplement the support of BREC.

Volunteers are needed to participate in cleaning, weeding, replanting, and plant sales to raise funds for construction in Phase Two of the Master Plan.

Hopefully, as interest in Louisiana irises inevitably grows, a Baton Rouge chapter of SLI can be formed to provide support for the Iris and Wetland Garden, as well as to engage in other activities involving the enjoyment and promotion of Louisiana irises. Other designated areas of the Botanic Garden, such as the Herb and Rose Gardens, are supported by local groups that focus on a particular type of plants, and in the long run a similar organization will be needed for the iris garden to thrive and endure.

## **Joe Mertzweiller's Introductions**

The Iris and Wetland Garden grows many of Joe Mertzweiller's introductions, but some are either missing or unidentified in mixed plantings. The Garden would like to obtain those introductions of Joe's that it does not now grow or cannot identify with certainty. Contributions of the following cultivars would be most welcome: AUNT SHIRLEY, BAYOU ORCHID, BELLE HELENE, BELLE LOU, COUNTER-POISE, CRESCENT CITY, FREDDIE BOY, GOOD DOCTOR, GRAPE FLUFF, MARSHA SUE, PRESS RELEASE, PROFESSOR CLAUDE, PROFESSOR ELLIS, PROFESSOR FRITCHIE, PROFESSOR JIM, PROFESSOR PAUL, PROFESSOR SIGMUND, SCARLET LADY, and SWAMP FLAME.

Those wishing to contribute time or plants should contact James Jeansonne, 16433 Caesar Ave., Baton Rouge, LA 70816, (225) 275-8103.