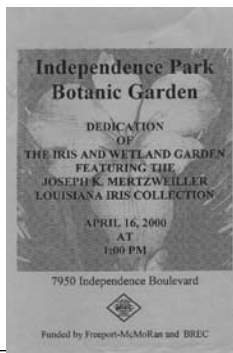


Iris and Wetland Garden Dedicated in Memory of Joseph Mertzweiller

In an April 16 ribbon cutting ceremony, the Baton Rouge Recreation and Parks Commission's Iris and Wetland Garden in the Independence Park Botanic Garden was dedicated to the memory of Joseph K. Mertzweiller, who conceived of the garden and was a driving force in its creation. The garden displays many of Joe's registered irises and numerous seedlings, as well as the irises of other hybridizers. It is a beautifully conceived facility that will support an exemplary display of Louisiana irises for years to come.



Helene Mertzweiller cuts the ribbon formally opening the Iris and Wetland Garden in Baton Rouge.



Remarks at the Dedication on Behalf of the Society

BY PATRICK O'CONNOR

It is an honor to be here today and to represent the Society for Louisiana Irises at this dedication. This beautiful iris garden is an enduring gift to the community, and thanks are due. We should appreciate the City, through BREC; the individuals who supported and worked on the project to create this setting; the contributors, especially Freeport McMoran; and the volunteers who have provided the labor of love to turn this spot into a beautiful garden.

Our greatest debt of gratitude is owed to Joe Mertzweiller. This place was his vision. He conceived of the Louisiana Iris garden and was a driving force behind its creation. Joe Mertzweiller grew, and actually developed through his hybridizing, most of the Louisiana irises that you see here. Joe's contribution to the Baton Rouge community through the creation of the Iris and Wetland Garden was huge.

That contribution did not end with this garden, however. Those of you who have been involved in the Society for Louisiana Irises are fully aware of this. I want to cite just a couple of examples.

First, by way of context, the Society for Louisiana Irises is an organization, founded in 1941, that has been dedicated to preserving, developing and promoting these native plants. Louisiana irises do not grow exclusively in Louisiana, but Louisiana is unique in the variety and concentration of species, colors and forms. As they diminish in the wild in the face of development (and this was a great concern of Joe's), it has been the mission of the Society to preserve this part of our natural heritage and to extend its potential by encouraging hybridizing to create the beauties you see here.

Due to the work of many, we have been remarkably successful in this mission. Louisiana irises are no longer just a wildflower appreciated by a relatively few, but have become plants widely recognized by the gardening public. And not just here, but all around the country.

Several individuals stand out have made critical contributions to our success, but Joe Mertzweiller ranks with the founders and early figures in the Society. And it is good company:

Caroline Dorman, the naturalist and writer who wrote about the early Louisianas and other native plants; Dr. John Small, the head of the NY Botanical Garden, whose collecting expeditions in the 1930s represent the modern "discovery" of these irises. And host of early collectors

from the 1930, 40s and 50s, who brought the species and natural hybrids in from the swamps and assured the preservation of the variety of colors and forms for future generations.

Joe Mertzweiller's contributions occurred in the second generation but they were easily of the same order of importance.

First, Joe was a leader, in energy, in dedication and in intellect. From the 1960s into the 1990s, Joe, along with Marie Caillet, were responsible for an outstanding series of publications, culminating in the definitive book on Louisiana irises. These publications have done more to promote Louisiana irises than any other single thing, aside from the beauty of the flowers themselves.

Joe's own hybridizing program was simply outstanding. He has left us with many gorgeous, named irises that we otherwise never would have seen, and the evidence of that is only a few feet away.

Joe's interests as a scientist led him to a singular achievement, the development of tetraploid Louisiana irises, which have a doubled set of chromosomes. Tetraploids, already achieved in other plant groups such as daylilies, proved more technically challenging for Louisiana irises, and took years of dedication and persistence. Their creation, however, has left us with the potential for the development of better, more varied and more vigorous irises.

I asked Kevin Vaughn, the new president of the Society, a friend of Joe's, and a fellow scientist (Kevin is a plant geneticist) what he might observe about Joe had he been able to be here. (Kevin had to represent the Society today at the American Iris Society meeting in Dallas, or he would have been with us). He said people should recognize that Joe accomplished in his backyard Baton Rouge garden, on a normal size lot, what plant scientists with acres of space and grant money would have been hard pressed to achieve.

Our Society owes as much to Joe Mertzweiller as the Baton Rouge community, which is the beneficiary of this beautiful place. We just completed our 59th annual convention in Lafayette this weekend, and I can assure you that Joe's irises, his ideas and his memory were very much alive there.

Thank you.