

A Tale of Renewal in New Orleans

~By Eileen Hollander

The story of my garden starts in the 1930's. My fraternal great aunts, uncle and grandparents lived in Victorians on either side of Coliseum Square in the lower garden district of New Orleans. This fertile high ground was formed by a crevasse (break in the Mississippi River levee) and never flooded. When a member of the Sicilian Mafia was killed on the sidewalk in front of my great aunt's house, the Egan family decided to relocate to the newly developed Uptown University Section adjacent to Tulane and Loyola. They selected 5430 and 5436 S.

Claiborne Ave. on the River side of Claiborne Avenue to be in Holy Name of Jesus Parish and an Avenue (rather than a street or boulevard) to be more socially prominent (They also paid more for the lots). The great open canal in the neutral ground was being closed and the Avenue was planted with live oak trees. A streetcar would run on top of the closed canal so that the area resembled present day St. Charles Avenue. (See photo of house and garden in 1937).

Gardening has always had a significant role in my life. My grandmothers belonged to Garden Clubs, in fact, that is how the families met. Since my grandmother's house near Audubon Park backed into the Stern's son's house. She and my mother often brought bag lunches to garden club meetings at Longue Vue. My maternal grandmother was proud to belong to the "Silk Stocking Garden Club". My fraternal grandmother, a recent transplant, moved in the same circles.

In 1949, when my parents married, E. A. Farley, the prominent nurseryman from Gentilly, landscaped their back yard as a wedding present. Needless to say, I had the best child hood growing up along side Alba Plena and Pink Perfection camellias- I was truly a flower child. Two "gardeners" from Buras, LA mowed the St. Augustine lawns and tended the beds weekly during the summer (acid loving camellias and azaleas need constant attention to perform well in New Orleans.) These skilled horticulturalists were expert arborists. They did much more than just mow grass and bag

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Front garden of 5436 So. Claiborne Ave. New Orleans in 1937 when house was built.

leaves as is done today.

In the winter, they spent more of their time tending their citrus crop. That's when the whole family would journey to Buras to buy hampers of the best navel oranges and mandarins in the world. In the summer, I had a fenced vegetable bed – no one was allowed in but me. My creole tomatoes, bell peppers and eggplants were gigantic. I fed the whole family. Special fertile soil, frequent watering and seven dust were my secrets.

Forty years ago, the roadside ditch and cypress swamp were about the only places for the general public to see Louisiana irises. (We grew Dutch Irises in our New Orleans garden.) One birthday, all I asked for was a Louisiana Iris plant. My mother, Estelle, felt that native plants should be left in the wild for future generations to see so she searched the Times Picayune newspaper for sale section for Louisiana Irises (they were unavailable at local nurseries). When we arrived at a private residence on Bancroft Drive, an exclusive area of the City adjacent to Bayou St. John, the owner wanted \$20 for a rhizome--a steep price in those days.

Since he had so many, he sold me all I could carry for \$20. The first few years they grew like a weed but did not bloom. I moved them to a sunnier location and anxiously waited for April. The bloom was extensive but disappointing – yellow (*pseudacorus*) - not the blue that I was used to seeing on the roadside. Seeing how disappointed I was, Moo (a nick name for mother reminiscent of Estelle Dairy) took me to one of the first Louisiana Iris Celebrations at Jean Lafitte, Louisiana. We purchased 'Clara Goula' and 'Ann Chowning'-- I was hooked but still no blue.

As my love for Louisiana irises grew, so did my collection --- until Hurricane Katrina August 2005. My father kept a red painted hatchet in the attic for "When not *If* the levees break". Six feet of water for a month did most plants in. Only the old live oak trees in front of the house, an acacia, several crinums and a firecracker bush survived. When the filthy

water receded, sediment and mold covered everything. The eerie silence was only broken by the occasional helicopter- no birds, no insects, no lizards, no cats, no dogs, no automobiles and no flowers. Everything was hot, humid, grey and noxious!!!!!!

A Mobile man with several helpers was going house to house removing the dead debris and landscaping. Plant material was scarce and selection was extremely limited since many growers lost their entire stock due to extreme heat, low rainfall and lack of electricity. Only 4 of the 36 dwarf gardenias and a half dozen liriopoe that they planted survive today. Price gouging --\$7,000 to landscape a small yard was common.

Being a charter member and officer in the Greater New Orleans Iris Society, I knew many Louisiana iris lovers, however, Rusty and Buddy McSparin were first to send me Aunt Shirley and a half a dozen other Louisiana irises to get me started. Patrick O'Connor, Benny Trahan and Joe Musacchia have added to my collection. I finally got my special blue when Patrick O'Connor named one of his cultivars for my mother "Estelle Egan".



'Estelle Egan'

Inspired by my mother being paralyzed from a stroke, I decided to make my backyard an "Enabling" garden. Most walkways are at least 30 inches wide for wheel chair access. Terra cotta and grey colored paver walkways not only facilitate drainage, but the grey pavers also define the borders for the



5436 S. Claiborne Ave. before Hurricane Katrina

sight impaired. Children and wheelchair bound gardeners can tend plants while seated on the 18-inch high planters.

Many objects d'art are Katrina survivors from family collections and broken household items. I wonder how many people will recognize the slate bottomed pool table? Roland Guidry helped install Trex decking for bed borders in my front and side yards. We encourage use of products made of recycled materials.

As President of the Pearl River County Master Gardeners, I participate in the Native Bee Project sponsored by Dr. Blair

Sampson, USDA. To encourage Texas Osmia native orchard bees to inhabit Mississippi, we made and installed over 50 native bee houses. The bees live in special sized holes in wood but because they do not drill holes their homes must be provided. Did you know native bees are 90% more efficient pollinators than nonnative honeybees? They are not aggressive since they don't protect honey so sting is rare and more like a mosquito bite. Unlike honeybee keeping, the lightweight wooden houses are installed in early spring and do not need regular maintenance. Because you do not get honey, you do not need to clean an 80 lb. house every 21 days. Bee condos will be on exhibit.

I am not a hybridizer-just an iris lover, grower and judge-in-waiting. My small, city-sized garden is LOW MAINTENANCE = no grass but lots of irises!

As President of the Greater New Orleans Iris Society, which is hosting the National Convention, I invite you to visit my garden on the Garden Tour, Thursday, April 3, 2014. Named Louisiana iris cultivars (potted and rhizomes) will be for sale with proceeds benefitting the Society for Louisiana Irises National Convention in New Orleans. Mark your calendar for April 3-5, 2014!

