

Louisiana Iris Day: Caroline Dormon's Legacy in Bloom

~By Hilairie Schackai, Longue Vue House and Gardens



Louisiana Iris Day guests enjoying light refreshments and music after viewing the irises.

Over the past four years, sometime in early March, Tyrone Foreman, caretaker of our Wild Garden and resident “irisiac,” tells a joke about the Louisiana iris. He swears you can hear them singing Chuck Brown and the Soul Searchers’ 1978 hit, “Bustin’ Loose.” Perhaps it’s delirium from the countless hours Foreman spends tending to every stray note of each individual iris, or maybe he really can hear them. What they (Foreman and the iris) are actually saying is that it looks like another early spring!

Having just completed celebrating the Fourth Annual Louisiana Iris Day at Longue Vue, which we had to move up to March 28 from April 7, one might think that our experience would make setting the date an easier task. Yet as every well-versed gardener today recognizes, scheduling an event around a flower’s limited bloom time is a tricky proposition. We can usually plan for rain dates, but global warming dates?

Earning national recognition as the dean of women landscape architects, Ellen Biddle Shipman designed the Wild Garden for Longue Vue founders Edith and Edgar Stern as one of fourteen garden rooms on their eight-acre estate. Adding significant cultural value and prestige to the Wild Garden were contributions made by Louisiana botanist, artist, and pioneer conservationist Caroline Dormon. Of all Dormon’s recommendations for plants suitable in recreating the Louisiana wild, it was her signature Louisiana Iris that became one of our most beloved living collections.

Some liken the serpentine iris path in the Wild Garden to a canoe ride down a narrow bayou in bloom. Stretching roughly three hundred feet, the Iris Path is the center of three paths meandering through the one-acre garden. Floodable troughs, or basins, that cradle and contain the iris collection, flank the crushed limestone walkway. The five native species (*Iris fulva*, *I. brevicaulis*, *I. hexagona*, *I. giganticaerulea*, and *I. nelsonii*) usher in the crescendo of color from the countless hybrids stretching to the brick dovecote, or pignonier, where on Iris Day local folk musicians strum out tunes connecting us to our cultural past.

Caroline Dormon’s contributions at Longue Vue are not limited to the Wild Garden. Recognizing Dormon’s talent and important intellectual and conservation-based pursuits, Edith Stern supported Caroline Dormon’s writing of her signature book, *Wild Flowers of Louisiana* (1934). Although the original plates were taken down in order to preserve them, reproductions are encased in a unique wall display in the house museum’s “Flower Arranging Room.” Louisiana Iris Day provides a rare opportunity to invite guests to view both the irises in the Wild Garden and Dormon’s watercolor drawings. Not very often is



Longue Vue able to celebrate both house and garden during a public event.

This year, Louisiana Iris Day welcomed about 150 guests. Greeting visitors along the path were many local iris heroes, notably Patrick O’Connor, Eileen Hollander, Benny Trahan and Joe Musacchia, whose invaluable knowledge and generosity are the lifeblood of this heritable, cultural touchstone. After Hurricane Katrina and the subsequent flooding, the Wild Garden irises were decimated by saltwater intrusion, upheaval, and neglect due to the enormity of the destruction.

Special to the Longue Vue collection is the ruffled white eponymous ‘Longue Vue’ and a handsome red hybrid with yellow signals called ‘Professor Neil,’ after the landscape architect who served as a consultant to Edith Stern in the 1970s.



In 2009, in conjunction with a landscape renewal plan supported by The Garden Conservancy, and through two native plant specialist positions underwritten by the Stanley Smith Horticultural Fund, the iris stock was replenished with iris donated by Plantation Point Nursery, Bois d'Arc Gardens and from the private collections of Patrick O'Connor and Benny Trahan. Garden staff member Tyrone Foreman continues to tend to the proliferating donation. As a Louisiana native and longtime naturalist, Foreman takes very seriously the value of each plant.



Miss Betty of the Greater New Orleans Iris Society gives close attention to a Patrick O'Connor cultivar.

And so we celebrate Louisiana Iris Day for a multitude of reasons: to commemorate Longue Vue's recovery from Katrina's destruction; to pay gratitude to iris lovers and conservators for their invaluable contributions to restocking our iris collection; to provide a platform from which to highlight Longue Vue's unique connection to Caroline Dormon; to build camaraderie around a shared interest in and appreciation for Louisiana natives; to strengthen our identity of place; to applaud the hard work of the garden department; and to hear great local music. Yet most of all, we celebrate Louisiana Iris Day—whenever it happens to fall these days—to appreciate the transcendent beauty of the Louisiana iris.



Hilarie Schackai has a background in horticulture and sustainable agriculture. In 2006, she joined Longue Vue to be part of the rebuilding of its historic gardens. The next year she took on an entirely new role in the history of Longue Vue when she became Garden Outreach Coordinator. In this position, and in her current role as Director of Community Initiatives and Education, Hilarie is engaged in strengthening her native New Orleans through landscape revitalization, environmental initiatives, artistic promotion, community engagement and educational programs.

Redbud Lane Iris Garden

2013 Introductions from Hooker Nichols

HEARTBREAK WARFARE-\$25

(Chuck Begnaud x Jacaranda Lad)



MELODY WILHOIT-\$25

(Ada Morgan x Spanish Ballet)



**Order From:
RedBud Lane Iris Garden
2282 N 350th Street
Kansas, IL 61933
*Add \$12.00 for shipping***



REVERCHON SNOWFALL-\$25

(Wahai Wedding x Crushed Ice)



VALENTINE PASSION-\$35

(Chuck Begnaud x Jacaranda Lad)

Ad designed by:

