



Jazzy Louisiana Irises

*Shapely blooms and
Mardi Gras colors spice up
gardens north and south*



by Marie Caillet

As a child I grew up alongside the bearded irises and wildflowers my mother raised each year. They were almost like family. Then, about the time of my 25th birthday, I moved from hot, dry Dallas to steamy, southern Louisiana. When the damp, humid climate of my new home proved intolerable for my beloved bearded irises, I had to make a dire decision. I could either head back to Texas, or I could try my hand with a beautiful wildflower native to the Gulf Coast—the Louisiana iris. Luckily, I chose the iris.

I liked Louisianas right away for their vivid yellows, bright blues and rich brick reds; for the fact that they were natives; and, finally, because they seemed so neglected. Gardeners paid them so little attention that it was as if the flowers needed somebody to help them along. That's where I came in.

I recognized their potential. They are easy to breed, easy to grow (they thrive as far north as Canada) and, of course, they are beautiful. We got along famously.

AN IRIS AT HOME ALMOST EVERYWHERE IN THE GARDEN

I grow most of my Louisiana irises with annuals and other perennials in regular flower beds, along borders, and in with my vegeta-

A wonder in water gardens, Louisiana irises are naturally a water or bog plant. The author showcases yellow 'Professor Barbara,' red 'Professor Neil' and rose 'Professor Marta Marie' in her own pond planting.





Louisiana irises command attention even in an informal setting. White Shasta daisies and pink phlox help create a bright backdrop (above).

Create a memorable composition with Western spider lilies and a splash of 'Colorific' Louisiana irises (near left). In the background, bursts of Penstemon break through thickets of swordlike iris foliage.

Like bright jolts of electricity, streams of white emanate from the center of a 'Violet Ray' (far left). The ray pattern of colors is typical of many water-loving irises.

bles. My most dramatic plantings are at the edges of a small pond that was once an overgrown mess (photo, p. 22).

I have a very informal garden that is often compared to English cottage gardens. The iris beds are also filled with larkspurs, *Coreopsis*, *Penstemon*, periwinkles and spider lilies (bottom right photo, facing page). To add to the informal look, I allow annuals such as old-fashioned petunias, annual poppies and Johnny jump-ups to reseed throughout (photo, left). Most bloom about the same time as the Louisiana irises. Perennials like daisies, phlox and daylilies add to the color and extend the bloom into summer. Daylilies are especially desirable since their bloom begins just as the irises finish.

LOUISIANA IRISES COME IN SCORES OF SHAPES, SIZES AND COLORS

Louisiana iris is the collective name for five iris species native to boggy coastal areas from the southern Atlantic states into Central Texas. They interbreed easily, and their many hybrid offspring—whether the work of botanists or of nature—are also known as Louisiana irises.

The common name comes courtesy of naturalist and wildlife artist John James Audubon, who painted the brick-red *Iris fulva* into the background of a portrait of the Parula warbler (illustration, above right). He identified the bloom as a Louisiana iris. The name stuck.

Each of the five original Louisiana iris species contributes a special quality to the hundreds of hybrids now on the market. The tallest *I. giganticaerulea*, grows up to 5 feet. It is an early bloomer with white to blue-purple flowers. *I. brevicaulis*, also white to blue, is a very late bloomer and grows under 2 feet tall. Another late bloomer, the slightly taller *I. hexagona*, has flowers in the same color range. The species of *I. fulva* and *I. nelsonii* contribute the brilliant reds and yellows for which Louisiana irises have become known. No other native iris started with this intense red color. With blooms in the primary colors of red, yellow



LOUISIANA IRIS

(*Iris fulva*, *I. giganticaerulea*, *I. brevicaulis*, *I. hexagona*, *I. nelsonii* and their hybrids)

- ◆ Herbaceous perennial hardy to USDA Hardiness Zone 4 (–30°F)
- ◆ Excellent in water or bog gardens
- ◆ In beds, prefers neutral to acid soil, and thrives with a half day or more of sun
- ◆ Use mulch to keep soil moist and protect rhizomes from sunburn
- ◆ Plants spread quickly from rhizome

and blue plus the native whites, Louisiana irises can be crossbred to make almost any color. There are blends such as 'Just Helene', bi-tones such as 'Kristi G' and near bi-colors like 'Colorific'. A signal patch marking—a colored swatch found on nearly all water-type irises—adds a splash of yellow or orange to the falls, the outer part of the flower, and sometimes to both the falls and the standards, the flower's inner petals (bottom left photo, facing page).

There is also extensive variety in flower forms. Some have upright standards and flaring falls like bearded irises. One of them, 'Kristi G', has a flaring form I call a



A namesake for four cultivars of Louisiana iris, author Marie Caillet was attracted to these Gulf Coast natives long before they became popular garden plants. Here, she stands by a clump of pink 'Kristi G'.

“butterfly” (photo, above). Others, such as ‘Delta Star’, have flower parts flat as cartwheels. Still others resemble Japanese irises, with the standards and falls hanging like a pendant.

A few cultivars have extra petals or petaloids, giving a double effect—‘Double Talk’ is a prime example. Others, such as ‘Bayou Fountain’, are ruffled or have lacy edges. The size of flowers ranges from about 4 inches across to the 7-inch-across ‘Aunt Shirley’, named for my sister.

The variations are endless. Characteristics such as height, color, markings and flower form are limited only by the imagination of modern hybridizers. About 500 different cultivars are currently available, but more than 1,000 have been registered.

LOUISIANA IRISES ARE EASY TO PLEASE

These so-called “Southern State Irises” adapt to garden situations from Canada to Arizona. The rhizomes and foliage

are almost disease-free if given good culture. Louisiana irises are hardy to USDA Hardiness Zone 4, with some record of success in even colder areas. They are grown on every continent save Antarctica, and have become one of the most popular irises in Australia.

Cultural requirements for Louisiana irises are simple: at least a half day of sun, a neutral or acidic soil, and plenty of fertilizer and water. They will grow almost anywhere, but very sandy or heavy clay soils should be amended with humus, such as peat moss, compost, bark mulch or rotted hay. Since Louisiana irises are naturally a water or bog plant, they excel in water gardens. The constant moisture keeps the rhizomes cool and prevents them from drying out when the plant’s growth slows during hot Texas summers. If the rhizomes do dry out, the plant’s growth suffers in fall and it may not bloom the next spring.

Late summer and early fall are the best times to plant or transplant Louisianas, but

planting is also possible right after bloom. New growth appears in fall, and in mild winters the foliage remains erect and green.

Most gardeners purchase Louisiana irises through mail order. Rhizomes are usually shipped moist and are wrapped in a plastic bag. On arrival, you should remove them from the bag and place them in water to rehydrate overnight. Never allow the rhizomes to dry out.

Louisiana iris rhizomes should be planted at least 1 inch under the soil, then topped off with 2 to 4 inches of compost or other mulching material. I like to use pine needles because they do not pack down or wash away with heavy rains. Once in the ground, new plants should be well watered until new roots begin to grow.

Mulch helps hold moisture and keeps the sun from scalding the rhizomes. I keep six compost bins full of oak leaves, pine needles, old flowers and even weeds, and use the compost to enrich beds prior to fall planting or as a mulch during the summer. Growers in colder climates will need to mulch during the winter.

Louisiana irises do not form compact clumps like Japanese and Siberian irises. Instead, they spread out as they increase, moving away from the initial rhizome. To keep cultivars separate for easier identification, space plants 2 to 3 feet apart. For an instant garden effect, group several different cultivars more closely.

Irises need fertilizing about four to six weeks before bloom to ensure sturdy stalks and good flowers. Established plants that are not being transplanted also need to be fertilized in late summer or early fall. I recommend a regular balanced garden fertilizer or an acid type sold for camellias and azaleas. I also like some of the water-soluble acid-type spray fertilizers on the market.

TURNING A SWAMPY, OVERGROWN EYESORE INTO A SHOWCASE FOR IRISES

My real showstopping display of Louisiana irises came about almost by accident. Thirty-five years after discovering the wildflower, I retired and moved back to north

A treasury of garden-worthy Louisiana irises

It's hard to pinpoint what makes some Louisiana iris cultivars more appealing than others, but most of those listed below have been in my garden for a long time. Some I've used to create whole landscapes. Others just seem to grow exceptionally well in my north Texas garden. Any list like this might change from year to year, but last season, these flowers caught my eye:

♦ **'Cajun Sunrise'**—The most photographed Louisiana iris in my garden, this breakthrough

in color features brownish-red flower parts edged in yellow.

♦ **'Colorific'**—Lavender falls, nearly white standards and a green throat make this excellent grower a standout.

♦ **'Crisp Lime'**—This ruffled white flower has a green throat.

♦ **'Delta Star'**—This cartwheel-shaped flower is dark purple, with narrow yellow signals. It grows especially well in water.

♦ **'Dixie Deb'**—This old cultivar makes an excellent garden flower. It's tall but well proportioned, with medium-sized yellow blooms. It increases well and grows under almost all conditions.

♦ **'Dural White Butterfly'**—Ruffled white blooms open in a clump atop this medium-height iris.

♦ **'Felician Hills' and 'Aunt Shirley'**—These medium-height and tall (respectively) cultivars are grown for their large, showy pink flowers. They increase well.

♦ **'Grace Duhon'**—As one of the darkest purples in the garden, the blooms of this cultivar provide an excellent contrast to lighter-colored flowers.

♦ **'Kristi G'**—This late bloomer has large, pinkish-lavender flowers; an excellent grower in bogs

and regular flower beds.

♦ **'Marie Caillet'**—This old cultivar, named after me, grows and blooms under almost any conditions. Its blue-purple flowers appear on tall, branching stalks.

♦ **'Marie Dolores'**—This excellent grower is beautifully branched. Its flower is white with a yellow-orange signal.

♦ **'Mrs. Ira Nelson'**—Slightly ruffled, flaring lavender flowers characterize this old cultivar.

♦ **'President Hedley'**—One of the few gold-colored Louisianas, this excellent grower has a Japanese-type pendant form.

♦ **'Professor Fritchie'**—Blooms of this tall and stately iris tower as much as 5 feet above the pond. It is one of the hardiest of the tetraploid varieties.

♦ **'Professor Ike' and 'Professor Claude'**—These large reddish-purple blooms with yellow signals were the first Louisiana-iris tetraploids.

♦ **'Professor Neil'**—Excellent color is the hallmark of this reddest of red Louisianas. Its flower is marked by a bright yellow signal.

♦ **'Rose Cartwheel'**—This desirable garden flower has narrow fronds of foliage and flat, rose-red blossoms. —M.C.



As the reddest of the Louisiana irises, 'Professor Neil' is something of a curiosity. This cultivar is one of the recently developed tetraploids, genetic treasures that hybridizers hope to use in the development of even more abundant diversity among Louisiana irises.



The 'Delta Star' shines bright. This tall, cartwheel-shaped variety stands nearly 4 feet off the ground.



At nearly 7 inches across, 'Aunt Shirley' offers an eye-ful of color. This tall vivid flower is named for the author's sister, Shirley Welch.

SOURCES

BAY VIEW GARDENS
1201 Bay St., Santa Cruz, CA
95060. Catalog, \$1.50.

BOIS D'ARC GARDENS
1831 Bull Run Rd.,
Schriever, LA 70395; 504-
446-2329. Catalog, \$1.

CONTEMPORARY GARDENS
Box 534, Blanchard, OK
70310; 405-485-3302.
Catalog, \$1.

LONE STAR IRIS GARDENS
5637 Saddleback Rd.,
Garland, TX 75043; 214-
240-4016. Catalog, \$2.

LOUISIANA NURSERY
Rte. 7, Box 43, Opelousas,
LA 70570; 318-948-3696.
Catalog, \$4.

REDBUD LANE IRIS GARDEN
Rte. L, Box 141, Kansas, IL
61933; 217-948-5478.
Catalog, \$1.

Extend the season of bloom by planting different iris species together. Another water-loving iris, yellow flag (*Iris pseudacorus* 'Roy Davidson') blooms earlier than the Louisiana irises, but its flowers linger long enough to complement a selection of bright Louisianas.

Texas to settle in a weekend cottage on some old family property, near a lake. The grounds had never been “groomed,” were overgrown with cedars, wildflowers and weeds, and overrun with foxes and coyotes, raccoons and armadillos, and snakes—including copperheads and water moccasins. If I planned to live here permanently, I had to civilize this place.

So I set to work making gardens, and soon it was decision-making time again: I could either go back to bearded irises, or I could try to grow the Louisianas in a climate that was hot and dry during summer, and cold in winter—very different from their natural habitat. Despite the scant encouragement I got from other iris growers, I wasn't going to give up easily. By this time I had a consuming interest in Louisianas, and was growing them and promoting them to other gardeners. I began interplanting a few with other irises—bearded varieties, spuria, Japanese and Siberian—and soon found that the Louisianas grew and bloomed just as well as the others.

As I continued civilizing my landscape, the biggest challenge was an old, abandoned holding pond for minnows. Its edges were thick with weeds and grasses, seedling shrubs and native cedars. Passing fishermen had left trash behind, and a rock retaining wall along one side had crumbled into the pond. I decided to clean up the mess and turn the pond into a showcase for my Louisiana irises; I knew they would thrive in water.

Once cleaned and cleared, the pond was about 15 feet wide and 40 feet long. When it is full of water, the deepest part is about 3 feet. Each end slopes up to ground level, where there are boglike beds. On the side of the pond nearest the house, I built a nar-



row planting shelf. The irises planted on the shelf and in the bogs gradually spread, moving toward the deeper water in such a hurry that their rhizomes actually grew over rocks. In fact, they multiply so rapidly that I have to thin them a little very other year. And every four or five years, I have to remove almost everything and start over.

I've probably given away as many as 15,000 rhizomes since starting the pond planting in 1980. At bloom time, in late April and early May, the pond becomes a riot of color.

A few water-loving plants have been added to extend the bloom season. *Iris virginica* and *I. pseudacorus* begin blooming earlier than the Louisianas (photo, above).



Japanese irises planted above water on the pond's edge bloom about a month after the other irises have flowered, but their foliage forms a nice green background to the Louisiana iris blooms. Spider lilies, native to Louisiana and Texas, bloom with the Louisianas and require identical culture. Visually, there is nothing to compare with

the sea of flowers—whites and yellows and reds and pinks and lavenders and purples and blues—blooming in and on the edge of the water. The irises, although growing more than 400 miles from their native habitats, seem completely at home, and the pond has become a real showcase. It's a treasure rescued from the trash.

My pond makes a pretty picture, and it is the most photographed spot in my garden. People ask what's in the pond, and I'm proud to tell them—after all, the Louisianas are now part of the family too. ♡

Marie Caillet has been growing Louisiana irises for more than 50 years.