

Briarwood's Louisiana Irises

Caroline Dormon's Bay Garden Needs Attention

The country's largest collection of historic Louisiana irises is threatened by delayed maintenance caused by extensive tornado damage in May 2019.

Caroline Dormon was one of the earliest Louisiana iris enthusiasts. Her interest in the irises dated from 1920, and they became a part of her expansive concern with the conservation of native plants. She was an early Louisiana iris collector and hybridizer and one of the few whose irises – at least some of them – survive today. That is primarily due to the unique character of Briarwood and the Bay Garden.

Briarwood, now 212 acres, was Caroline Dormon's home place. After her death in 1971, the property passed to the Board of Directors of the Foundation for the Preservation of the Caroline Dormon Nature Preserve. The Bay Garden is in a spring-fed seep in the hilly terrain, providing the wet habitat Louisiana irises love. It is also wet enough for pitcher plants, golden clubs, and ferns to thrive.

An exceptionally destructive tornado battered Briarwood in May 2019. While the Bay Garden escaped much direct damage, the indirect effects have resulted in a significant decline in the iris bloom and a threat to the rhizomes themselves. The tornado decimated the tree canopy, letting in more light and triggering massive weed growth. Because of the work to recover from significant damage to buildings and paths elsewhere at Briarwood, it has not been possible to address the needs of the Bay Garden sufficiently. In fact, it had to be virtually ignored for a time.

The major weed growth – imagine Joe Pye Weed standing five feet tall – has been removed, but the 29 rows of irises have not been fertilized and replanted since before the tornado. No mulching or removal of “normal” weeds has been possible. Bloom has declined to a couple of dozen stalks in 2023, and if the needs of the irises are not met soon, some varieties, including old, historical ones, will dwindle and be lost. Many of these varieties exist nowhere else.

Not all the irises at Briarwood date back to Caroline Dormon's work, but contemporary hybridizers of hers, such as Frank Chowning, Claude Davis, and Sidney Conger, are represented. Charles Arny irises from 1970s are in the collection, but other than a few Joe Mertzweiller tetraploids, the cultivars are a throwback to an earlier era. Overall, the planting is a unique window into our iris past, and if that window closes at Briarwood, the view may be lost forever.

The solution is simple. The Bay Garden needs an applica-

From the Curator *Greetings!*

When I began at Briarwood, I did not know much of anything about Louisiana irises. I have always been a “tree person.” Now, I am becoming slightly obsessed with Caroline Dormon's Bay Garden.

I often hear about how beautiful and special the Bay Garden once was. Now, I am scared for the future of the place. It would be horrible if we let the dedicated work of Caroline Dormon, past Curators Jessie and Richard Johnson, and Rick Johnson be lost. Without the means to return to a maintenance schedule that the irises in the Bay Garden require – and that they enjoyed before the 2019 tornado – I am afraid that could happen. We need a focused effort to **Restore the Bay Garden and Save the Irises.**



Bayli and Clovis

The Foundation for the Preservation of the Caroline Dormon Nature Preserve needs your help with this project. Whether it is advice, financial assistance, or labor – we need it all. I look forward to hearing from you. Please reach out if you have any questions, comments, or concerns.

I want to thank those who have supported me since I began my journey as Curator here at Briarwood. Only with your help will I be able to do the work that Briarwood requires and deserves.

Sincerely,
Bayli Q. Brossette
Curator



tion of the same iris culture as in our home gardens. However, not many of us have 29 rows of cultivars to attend to, and not many have experienced enough tornado damage that we are several years behind with our upkeep.

Restore The Bay Garden – Save The Irises

Saving the irises at Briarwood is a project that will require labor and financial resources. One obstacle is that Briarwood is somewhat remote, located on the edge of the Kisatchie National Forest about 30 miles north of Natchitoches in central Louisiana. There are regular volunteers at Briarwood, but not in nearly sufficient numbers to tackle the entire Bay Garden in a single fall planting season. The Society will undertake a volunteer recruitment effort in the fall, but the scope of the work will likely require some local part-time labor in addition to volunteers.

Both labor and supplies require funds. Soil, fertilizer, and mulch are essential to replanting the irises and rejuvenating the beds. There will also be other incidental expenses in hosting multiple work days to do the job.

The Bay Garden covers an area of about 50 X 30 yards. The 29 rows of irises are densely packed with two-foot wide paths between them. The logistics of moving people and material around the garden will complicate the work and require that it be done in several phases over a month or two.

Briarwood has planned the process of reworking the entire garden and has phased contingency plans to save the irises. Success will largely depend on the volunteer and financial support received from those who see the true value of the unique iris collection that is part of Caroline Dormon’s legacy.



Bayli and Clovis in the Bay Garden in February, 2023. The irises are hanging in, but the bloom in April was poor. Other pictures are from 2013 when the Garden was thriving and showing off some of the cultivars seldom or never seen elsewhere. Immediately above are 'Caroginia' (Conger, 1948) and the pale 'Louisiana Fascination' (Arny, 1969). Above right, a corner of the Garden with 'Full Eclipse' (Hager, 1967) and 'Sea Wisp' (Rowlan, 1983) in full bloom and, below, 'Flat Top' (Davis, 1953) and 'Noblesque' (Conger, 1956).

Restore The Bay Garden! **Save the Irises**

Yes, I'd like to help!

- Make a financial contribution of your choosing using the Donate button on the home page of the Briarwood website (PayPal and credit cards accepted): www.briarwoodnp.org
- Mail a financial contribution payable to: Briarwood Nature Preserve, 216 Caroline Dormon Road, Saline, LA 71070
- Join the mailing list for updates about volunteer days in the Bay Garden this fall to help replant the irises and about the progress of the Restoration work.

Send an email to Bayli Q. Brossette, Curator. Include your city and state.
briarwoodnp@gmail.com

Kickoff Workday September 2
Details to follow.

Thank You!

