

The Guardian Gardener's Handbook: What is Rare?

What do we mean by *rare*?

In historic irises, we mean *extremely uncommon and hard to find*. We mean, in essence, *endangered*. Some of the irises we've rescued were down to just one known clump in the whole world.

How do we know what's rare?

We use a formula. In the early days of the GG program, we put many, many hours of discussion into determining this formula, and we're well aware it's not perfect. However, it's the best we've been able to come up with, and it gives us a starting point for determining rarity. Sometimes we've been delighted to learn that an iris we thought was very rare is in fact not that bad—but we'd rather err on the side of caution.

To determine the rarity of any given iris, we list two things: the number of known commercial sources and the number of people in HIPS who report growing it. Note that both of these numbers require reporting, and that's where the weakness lies. We can only work with known quantities. Our Commercial Source Chair and our HIPS Databank Chair do their best to record accurate information, but if people don't report their iris holdings, our figures are inaccurate. We do the best we can with what we have. Let's look how we use the numbers we do have. These numbers can be found on the HIPS website; they are updated regularly.

The **Commercial Source List** tells us how many (and which) vendors sell a particular iris. **If two or fewer vendors offer an iris, it's considered rare and qualifies to enter the GG program.**

The **HIPS Databank** tells how many HIPS members have reported growing the iris in their garden. Sadly, most HIPS members don't bother to report annually, no matter how much we encourage them, so our numbers are way off here. **If four or fewer HIPS members are known to grow the iris, it's considered rare and qualifies to enter the GG program.**

Let's look at some examples:

As of this writing, the lovely TB 'Beau Sabreur' (E. B. Williamson, 1930) is not offered by any vendors that we know of. Therefore, its first number is 0. It is grown by only one known HIPS member; therefore, its second number is 1. That means it's a 0-1 iris. Super-rare!

'Crinkled Gem' (Schreiner, 1964) has two Commercial Sources, is in four known HIPS gardens: 2-4. It's not so *terribly* rare, but still qualifies to enter the GG program.

But what about dear old 'El Tovar' (H. P. Sass, 1933)? No vendors offer it,

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but six known HIPS gardeners have it. That's a 0-6, which is outside of our 2-4 GG entry criterion. Well, we know the formula is imperfect. We're creating a Watch List for just this kind of iris and a few others that might otherwise fall through the cracks of preservation. (See "The Watch List" elsewhere in this handbook.)

What happens when a GG iris "graduates" above the 2-4 threshold?

Once an iris enters the GG program, it stays there, no matter how common it gets. We're always excited when a formerly rare iris regains enough population that it's no longer endangered, but we sure want to keep an eye on it. When the rating numbers, added together, total 10 or higher, that iris goes on the Watch List. A good example is 'Cyanea' (Goos & Koenemann, 1899), which has made it all the way up to 3-16 ($3+16 = 19$, well over 10). We love that!

Although our GG rating system isn't perfect, it gives us a working basis for determining rarity. In the worst case, we're underestimating, never overestimating, the population of an iris. That's like learning that an endangered penguin is nesting on TWO remote islands, not just one, as we'd previously believed: good to know, but we still need to keep an eye on those penguins.

Where to find the lists: Refer to "Contacts & Useful Links" elsewhere in this handbook.