

The Hidden Treasures of Winterberry

By Charlie Carver

When you first arrive at Winterberry Iris Gardens, the home of Don and Ginny Spoon, set along a country lane in far northern Virginia, you can't help noticing there are plants everywhere—irises of course, bed after bed, row upon overwhelming row—but also an enviable collection of daylilies, as well as roses, peonies, and an assortment of other perennials.



A corner of the beds at Winterberry

Doug Paschall, the administrator of the Guardian Gardens program, and I arrived in early evening on the last day of June to meet the Spoons and orient ourselves prior to commencing a dig the next day. A cheerful Ginny Spoon greeted us and took us on a tour of the gardens, guiding us to the Miniature Dwarf Bearded and Miniature Tall Bearded beds that were to be the focal points of our efforts. Our conversation with Ginny confirmed a prior impression: at 6,000 iris cultivars (down from 7,500 at its peak) Winterberry is the largest collection—private, public, or commercial—that Doug and I are aware

of...anywhere. A survey of the MDB class, underway for the past two years, also indicated that Winterberry is curator of the largest known collection of MDB, a considerable number of which were known to be growing only in this garden.

National Collections had initiated a pilot project in 2016 to assemble a core class collection of MDB: i.e., all of the varieties still known to exist, both historic and modern. That mission was spurred by the survey data that placed the extinction rate in the MDB class at 74% and highlighted that two-thirds of the remaining cultivars were on the verge of extinction. The Winterberry collection was a high priority because of the concentration of endangered varieties there. We were there to rescue those at-risk iris.

Some people object to the use of the word *rescue*, as it often implies a need for an intervention in instances of abuse or neglect. But we were not rescuing irises *from* someone, we were rescuing them for something: for preservation. When the data we have suggests a cultivar is rare or endangered, known to be growing in only a few gardens or perhaps just one, the principle of conservancy requires us to rescue it *from* extinction, to place it in a conservancy collection where it can

be propagated and distributed to sister collections until there is sufficient redundancy to assure its survival.

After Ginny Spoon acquainted us with the gardens, Doug and I returned to our lodgings to ready ourselves for the next day's work. It had been a long day. I had taken an



Carolyn Gilliom, Allyson Whalley, and Charlie Carver at Montpelier
W. D. Paschall photo

overnight flight from Seattle to Philadelphia, where Doug picked me up. Prior to our arrival at Winterberry, we had driven down to President James Madison's former estate at Montpelier to meet with staff horticulturalist Allyson Whalley and a volunteer, Carolyn Gilliom, to tour the gardens and consult about iris varieties that could be used for a period garden there—or more accurately, two period gardens, one for the time during Madison's tenure and another for the period afterwards, when the DuPont family acquired the estate. We also discussed period perennials in other genera—daylily, gladiolus, tulip, and peony—all interests of mine.

On the morning of Saturday, July 1, after an early breakfast with Allyson Whalley and her friend Brandon Haggard, who had come up from Montpelier to assist in the dig, we caravanned up to Winterberry. National Collections had initiated this rescue and teamed up with Guardian Gardens, who organized the volunteers. It was our second project together but the first time Doug and I had met and had the opportunity to work shoulder to shoulder. We met the volunteers there: HIPS members Maureen Mikolajczak and Bonnie McKenzie, Arthur Weiler of GG, Montpelier volunteers Carolyn Gilliom, Roberta Jalbert, Kris Eggleston, Susan Wist, and, of course, Allyson Whalley and Brandon Haggard. Ginny Spoon was also there throughout the day to assist us whenever we needed it. With the day's ambitious goals outlined, there was unfortunately not much time to socialize. After introductions, we assigned tasks and set to work locating and digging MDB.

There is nothing sexy about an iris rescue. Volunteers typically travel a considerable distance to participate, giving up time with family or more leisurely pursuits. The digs occur in summer. The dig is all weeds and dirt, heat and



Rescuers being briefed at Winterberry

Whalley photo

sweat, sore backs and knees for a minimum wage of rhizomes. There is usually a small window of time available, generally over a weekend—in this case a holiday weekend—and the work requires a lot of focus, depending on the task. What kind of crazy are we?

Crazy we may be, but work we did. Part of our agreement with Don and Ginny was that we would help with weeding, and I am very grateful for the volunteers who undertook that task. It would have been difficult to locate many of the cultivars we were looking for without their efforts. Thank you. Every task performed at a dig is equally important and a valuable contribution to a team effort.



Charlie Carver & Doug Paschall working in the arilbred bed at Winterberry

Whalley photo

By midday a good share of the MDB had been located, dug, bagged, and labeled. Due to the distances to return home, most of the volunteers had to leave early in the afternoon. The rest of us continued until early



Don & Ginny Spoon at Winterberry

evening, but we did complete the entire list, Ginny trudging back and forth with us to find varieties in far-flung locations, Carolyn keeping track of what was dug and labeling bags, me digging, Doug labeling fans, Allyson and Brandon still weeding.

If MDB were the only purpose of our visit, we might have headed home the next morning, but we had a secondary agenda: to dig from Winterberry's rare MTB for two National Collections being assembled. So Doug and I set out for Winterberry again on Sunday morning, teaming up with Allyson and Brandon, who had returned once more to help us. Ginny joined the fray again as well. While Brandon continued weeding, Allyson kept track of the list, calling out the varieties sought and labeling the bags as Doug and I located and extricated the rhizomes, and Ginny clarified which plant was which. We were done by midday and Allyson and Brandon, troopers to the very end, headed home, having spent their entire weekend assisting us. Doug and I spent the afternoon processing fans, dividing rhizomes for various collections in NC and GG, and packing them for shipment.

While most of the rescue was a very focused effort with specific targets, there were surprise moments when I stumbled on one of those unexpected jewels. I remember coming across a tag for Amos Perry's 1903 Dwarf Bearded (DB) introduction, now assigned to the MDB class

(though given its parentage, it is likely not an MDB). It was on my target list, but I couldn't find the plant. I was feeling very disappointed when I noticed a tag for 'Azurea' 1881, thought to be a natural hybrid between *Iris lutescens* and *Iris pumila*. I was a bit speechless. It hadn't been on the inventory Ginny had sent me for the survey. Neither was Westfall's 1971 'Fuzzy'.

When Doug and I returned to Winterberry on Monday for a third day of work so he could dig some historic for the volunteers, I set about reconnoitering the beds and other classes of iris. I was

W. D. Paschall photo

delighted to find Bennett Jones's SDB 'Blue Rill', which I wanted for a National Memorial Collection. I took notes on other medians I knew to be uncommon or rare, and made a lengthy list as I went from bed to bed. Though I took notes for at least a couple of hours, I barely made a dent in the number of beds to investigate at Winterberry, and continue to wonder how many more hidden treasures are growing there.

In truth the great treasures at Winterberry are Don and Ginny. Though I had acquired many irises from them over the years (I am a big fan of Don's SDBs) and frequently corresponded with them, I had never met them. Over the few days they hosted us, while digging, during breaks, and in the after-hours we had opportunities to chat with them on an array of topics, and I developed a great affection for them. Both are intelligent, warm, generous, good-humored souls, who made this rescue both a success and a great pleasure. That last morning, July 4, after we had packed the car, we returned to Winterberry one last time to say good-bye to Don and Ginny. I was sad to leave and I laugh to remember Ginny and me cramming a few more irises into a box that we dug at the last moment. Thank you, Don and Ginny. Thank you to all of the volunteers who contributed to a memorable experience and pushed the preservation of iris cultivars closer to the goal. ❧