

## West and Midlands Iris Group at RHS Malvern 2015

The West and Midlands Iris Group have been having a stand in the Plant Societies Section of the Malvern Flower Show for many years. I have been involved now for about 4-5 years, and have seen the Show change from a Flower Show to a Spring Festival. There is still the Floral Marquee, Show Gardens, a wide variety of nurseries and sundry gardening accessories, along with all the other Flower Show activities that you would expect. But, there is also now, a significant showing of craftspeople, specialist food stands and an enormous variety of non-gardening related activity. Whether or not this is a good thing is open to debate!

Be that as it may, we have continued our presence at the Show as we find it a good forum for education about irises and what we and the BIS do. This year the display centred on a rainbow, coming down from a central column to a spectacular array of bearded iris in all the rainbow colours, culminating on the ground with a crock of gold (filled with chocolate gold coins and *Iris*'Orange Caper'.) Bringing these irises into flower a few weeks early can be particularly difficult. Last year, with a similar display, we drove all the way to Kent and bought in irises from Sue Marshall at iris of Sissinghurst. This was the 'easy option'! For 2015 we decided that we should try to grow the irises for the display ourselves. Members of the group donated irises and we grew them in pots in a greenhouse -heated or unheated as appropriate, encouraging growth by bringing them indoors as necessary -then trying to slow some down when they threatened to open too soon. It was a steep learning curve, but ultimately we achieved enough colour to make a eye-catching display.



We are lucky to have Fern Harden on the team, and as an ex-florist, and an artist, she is able to see the best way to position the plants for the most dramatic effect. She also made two stunning floral displays of Dutch Iris. One of the 'rules' of a display of flowering plants at an RHS Show, is that the majority of flowering plants should be in flower on the stand. So, with this in mind, we try to work with whatever irises are likely to be in flower. Members of the group will also bring plants in flower to the Stand while we are setting up on the day before the show opens to the public, and we build these into the display as appropriate. This year we had a few Siberian Irises in flower, and some PCIs, which really caught the public eye. Labels can also be problematic, as they should be accurate and written in white on black. Charlie Harden has been writing them for us for about three years, but there are still plenty of new ones to write on the day. Particular thanks go to her!

The RHS judging starts at about 3.30 on Wednesday evening, so there is always a lot of pressure to complete the stand on time. We just made it, but were not able to do a last minute check. Medals are awarded first thing on Thursday morning, so the envelope is there when we arrive on the stand. This year we won a Silver Gilt medal with one 'excellent' and three 'very goods' on the accompanying score sheet. Later in the day the senior judge came to the stand to discuss the details... it appeared that there was actually very little 'wrong' -just that they felt that our display photo albums were not accessible enough to the public as they were on a back table rather than a front table! We also had two plants that were not quite at their best.

As for the show itself -we had an excellent footfall this year, and sold most of the seeds we had available, to the extent that we ran out of a number of varieties. Discussion with the public on why their irises do not flower, or what will grow in particular conditions is generally the order of the day, and dealing with 'Oh, I didn't know that you could grow irises from seed!' The stand was particularly busy from about mid-day, as we were positioned near the plant crèche. We were able to recruit a few new members and raise public awareness of the iris and the Iris Society. Once we get over the exhaustion of the week, we look forward to doing it all again next year! Anne Milner Chairman, West & Midlands Iris Group

