Some Early History of Dwarf Iris

by Walter Welch

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The dwarf bearded iris have little of past history comparable to that of the tall bearded iris, for in spite of the fact that there has been considerable interest of a tentative and intermittent nature in the past, it was not enduring enough nor specialized sufficiently to provide sustained progress. In the literature of iris, only minor reference to dwarfs is found and that chiefly in the papers of W. R. Dykes, who was interested principally in collecting the species and assembling them into their correct status and classification. We are indebted to him for giving us some clear and exact descriptions of the species and eliminating many duplications of names and forms within the various categories.

Sir Arthus Hort states, "Of the dwarf flowering bearded irises I cannot say much. The nomenclature of this group is very difficult to disentangle, and Foster used to speak of it as a great puzzle. The name pumila has been recklessly applied to all sorts of dwarf varieties, whereas the true *pumila* is a rather rare plant and not very easy to grow; and a mysterious class ticketed 'Crimean' irises has been created out of a confusion between Olbia in the Crimea and Olbia in Provence, while a number of local forms, especially of *chamaeiris* [*I. lutescens*] had been elevated into species. Foster, through his friends, got together a number of the wild dwarfs and did much work in the way of disentangling their affinities and Mr. Dykes has now by patient labor put the nomenclature of this group on an intelligible footing."

Even today, the monumental work called *The Genus Iris* by Dykes is recognized as the main authority on the iris family and writers since his time have merely quoted him and no further investigations of the dwarfs had been undertaken until very recently.

Mrs. Ella Porter McKinney in her book *Iris in the Little Garden* has given us some brief accounts of a restricted number of varieties that were current at that time, and later Mr. John C. Wister published his small volume called *The Iris,* which makes only casual mention of the dwarfs. The American Iris Society publication *The Iris: An Ideal Hardy Perennial* gives only a small space to the dwarfs and adds nothing new to the information available. This meager information, or rather lack of information, on dwarfs is repeated in the publication of Prof. Mitchell. To make a summation, there is no adequate and authoritative source of information available today, with the exception of descriptions on species to be bound in the writings of W. R. Dykes, and the materials published in recent bulletins of the AIS and particularly in the *Portfolios* of the Dwarf Iris Society.

Haage & Schmidt of Erfurt, Germany, was probably the first to send out a few varieties of dwarfs, and as they were a seed house and modem methods of hybridizing were not practiced at that time, it is probable that their varieties resulted from insect or open pollinations. At any rate, none of their varieties are still available in commerce today.

Another German firm, Goos and Koenemann, a few years later sold a few varieties of dwarfs of which some, such as 'Excelsa', 'Compacta', 'Florida', 'Citrea', 'Floribunda', and 'Schneekuppe' are still grown in some gardens.

However, around the turn of the century a few experimental minds began to use the dwarf species in their investigations, the result being that some new and interesting types were born and put on the market under varietal names.

For example, W. J. Caparne, an artist, who painted pictures of iris, and as a catalogue of that period states, “has been engaged in collecting, hybridizing and illustrating the genus,” is credited with the development of a new race of irises. Credit is given him chiefly with the founding of intermediates, that race midway between the dwarfs and tall bearded iris and a hybrid of these two; but along with these, he introduced numerous varieties of dwarf parentage, gave them names, and offered them in a catalogue, dating about 1901. This is practically the beginning of any serious attempt to develop dwarf iris.

Although most of these varieties have disappeared, I have been able to find the following, which I still grow here in my garden: ‘Bouquet’, ‘Bride’, ‘Hamonia’, ‘Libra’, ‘Leopold’, ‘Niobe’, ‘Naomi’, ‘Puck’, ‘Sapphire’, and ‘Stewart’. These were introduced in 1901 and 1902.

Around 1950, the American Iris Society had given recognition of this worthy undertaking by inaugurating for dwarf iris an award, known as the Caparne Award, which at that time was the highest award attainable for dwarfs and in practice was considered as equivalent to the Dykes award for tall bearded iris.

By careful search in the AIS *Checklist*, you may find a few varieties listed with dates of introduction previous to that time, such as ‘Mecenes’ (Lemón, 1848), ‘Lutea’ (Ker-Gawl, 1809), ‘Pumila Atroviolacea’ and ‘Statellae’ (Todaro, 1856), ‘Biflora’ (Dickson, 1794), but evidently some were natural hybrids or chance seedlings and of these only ‘Atroviolacea’ and ‘Statellae’ are known to exist today. Caparne must be given credit for the original work in hybridizing dwarfs.

We sometimes wonder what species some of these older breeders may have used in their work. In a letter from W. J. Capame to Mr. Wister dated December 1920, he states: “I should like to suggest to your hybridists the values of certain plants for their work; for dwarf plants, *Iris mellita* [*I. suaveolens*]*, arenaria* [*I. humilis*]*, rubromarginata, balkana* [*I. reichenbachii*]*,* this latter has great possibilities both for color and form.”

In another article by R. S. Sturtevant in regard to Caparne he says: "He lists *I. pumila* of Southern Europe, *I. flavissima* [*I. humilis*] of Siberia, and *I. mellita* form Transylvania as the parents of the first twenty-eight varieties, none of which with the possible exception of ‘Delicata’ is available today. Of group II, *virescens, lutescens, chamaeiris, balkana, italica, olbiensis* [all synonyms of *I. lutescens*]*, biflora* and *fieberi* [forms of *I. aphylla*] are listed as parents and again only a few are occasionally available.”

Terminology has always been and still is responsible for some difficulty in establishing and maintaining identities in the dwarfs. There were numerous duplications of names and plants under the same name, and all attempts at remedying this condition had been futile.

In *Bulletin* 25 of the AIS, I find the following comments by A. H. Wright, who at that time was attempting to straighten out that situation: “On February 4, 1927, we published 650 names of dwarf bearded iris. In the last half year since that date, 150 more have accumulated, making 800 names or spellings in all. No doubt others are in the offing. No one believes there are that number of dwarf bearded iris… We have been groping for a sane method of simplification and unification of names of the dwarf bearded iris, but

cannot arrive at any conclusion until we hve studied the iris themselves… For example, we dare not say that alba, albiensis alba, chanaeiris alba, nova alba, olbiensis alba, pumila alba, lutescens alba, statellae alba, etc., are all the same, nor would it be wise for any committee, however erudite, to attempt to analyze them without study of the iris themselves."

Only alter our Dwarf Iris Society had established its test garden here at Middlebury, Ind., and collected and grew every variety known to exist at that tine, and through research and study and comparison, did we have success in clarifying the records. The results of this work made it possible for the Dwarf Iris Society to publish the first authoritative *Dwarf Iris Check List* in 1955 and a revised edition in 1962.

I remember having seen articles and quotations from some of our most outstanding and recognized breeders of the past, in which they made claims of crossing onto pumilas and nonchalantly state that "pumila for dwarfs is also in use." Also some state, "Of the old and earliest midget, true pumilas or stemless iris, 'Atroviolacea' is the first to bloom and 'Azurea' is next and both are good." Neither are *pumilas* but only hybrids of *pumilas.* This custom of calling all dwarfs as pumilas has prevailed since the earliest times and only recently have people taken the trouble to become informed that the name pumila applies only to the species *I. pumila.*

After Caparne, there was little work done with the dwarfs. European breeders put out a few varieties occasionally and the early breeder in the U. S. imported stocks and made a few crosses but altogether the work has been intermittent and not very serious.

I have here an old catalogue from the Laurel Hill Nurseries, of Stockbridge, Mass. Apparently at that time dwarfs were called the New Crimean Iris, and it is interesting to note the varieties which were sold at that time. Here is listed:

Barbara	Beauty	Blanche
Blue Beard	Blue Stone	Bridesmaid
Canary Bird	Conspicua	Curiosity
Delicate	Golden Ball	Golden Dwarf
Harlequin	Innocence	Niobe
Orange Queen	Princess Louise	Purple King
Snowball	Standard	Balkana

These were quoted at 35 cents each or 3.50 per doz.

Around 1908, the Bay State Nurseries imported a lot of dwarfs, listed them, and they received rather large distribution. Grace Sturtevant bought most of these and used then for breeding. Her seedlings were in the garden for years, though few were named and fewer introduced. 'Ylo' is probably the most outstanding among her varieties.

About the same time, Mrs. Ella Porter McKinney began doing some work with the dwarfs, though on a smaller scale, and among her introductions were 'Glee' and 'Black Midget', which became quite popular. It is unfortunate that few records of the activities of these early hybridizers of dwarfs have been preserved for our information. Mr. Robert Sturtevant states, "My sister knew the value of records, really

established the policy for the AIS, thank heaven, though Bruce Williamson with his more scientific hobbies did not second it and I doubt if any of the early German or American breeders kept records as such, I doubt if Farr or Burchfield kept much if any. Most of our own earlies were selected at Bay State Nurseries around 1908 and presumably from G & K."

By investigating the listings in the AIS *Checklist,* you will find a generous number of names as introducers of dwarfs. One would get the impression that much work had been done in this field and that commensurate progress had been accomplished. Among those listed are Ouden, Foster, Milliken, Boiss, Barr, Burchfield, Fryer, Sheets, Dickson, Miles, Wayman, McKelvey, Caparne, Van Fleet, Nesmith, Loomis, Junge, Emigholz, Fellows, Baker, Callis, Sturtevant, Sass, Donahue, Craigie, Cook, Andre, Ayres; that is just a few of the imposing roster of names.

Mr. Fryer, working in a secluded spot and quietly, gave us several varieties, mostly derivatives of *chamaeiris,* which have found some favor with dwarf enthusiasts. These were all named after friends of his at the Mayo Clinic and bear such names as 'Dr. Potter', 'Dr. Crenshaw', 'Dr. Mann', etc.

Sam Burchfield deserves a place of honor on the roll of fame in dwarf history for his special interest in dwarfs and his many fine contributions in this category. His 'Harbor Lights', 'Huron Imp', 'Buzzer' 'Endymion', 'Reflection', 'Silver Elf', 'Burchfield', 'Bonny' and 'Judy' are still grown in many gardens and are among the best of the older varieties. We don't know what materials he used, as we have only his catalogue to inform us, but apparently he had none of the *pumila* species, and as some of his varieties have 44 chromosomes, he evidently used the *chamaeiris* forms for his dwarf parents.

The Sass Bros. have made one of the most important contributions of recent years in the improvement of the dwarfs. But as in most of the other instances, the dwarf work was secondary to their main interest, which was the production of intermediates. However, their varieties were the standard by which most dwarfs were judged a few years back. Their list is quite long and includes the following: 'Black Maroon', 'Little Jewel', 'Neola', ' Owaissa', 'Tony', 'Pink Mauve', 'Rose Mist', 'Sass Dark Ruby', and 'Sound Money'. In a letter from Mr. Sass, he states that all of these dwarfs came from 'Socrates' and its seedlings, as this variety had proven to be their best parent. Sass never owned a *pumila,* though he recorded the parentages as coming from "pumila."

From the time of the Sass dwarfs, this field remained in a static condition until Paul Cook around 1935 introduced two seedlings from a new kind of breeding. These were named 'Tampa' and 'Keepsake' and derived from crossing 'Socrates' with *I. arenaria*. Later he introduced two more seedlings from another new species, this time from the use of *I. pumila.* These were 'Alinda' and 'Violet Gem'. This is where we ordinarily consider as the break away from the old order and launching us upon the modem trend. Previous to this, most varieties were merely forms or derivatives of the species *I. chamaeiris,* and practically all varieties came in purples or yellows with an occasional near vthite form. But we still had not broken out of that restricted color range of purples and yellows; that was to cone very shortly, though.

This new break from the past was made possible through the acquisition of some forms of *I. pumila,* which Robert Schreiner had raised from seed imported from Europe, and of which he had named three varieties called 'Sulina', 'Carpathia', and 'Nana'. Previous to this, it is believed that *I. pumila* had never been grown in this country.

Mr. H. M. Hill, taking the cue from Paul Cook, started using *I. arenaria* and soon came out with a line of hybrids such as 'Mist O'Pink', 'Beonya', 'Tiny Treasure' and 'Cream Tart'. These *arenaria* hybrids were starting to kindle interest in dwarfs because of their dainty and different character, though no new colors had yet appeared among the dwarfs.

While Paul Cook and Mr. Hill had created new interest in the dwarfs, Walter Marx out in Oregon began introducing several new varieties, and this added to the promotion of interest in dwarfs. Mr. Marx introduced 'Moon Gleam', which became very popular, and soon his 'Beauty Spot' from dwarf x Regelia set another new mark in the dwarf field. Things were getting ripe for the big break. But as yet no one had broken through this purple and yellow barrier. Then came the one thing which was needed to set things into motion; new color and pattern forms. The new era in dwarf iris was on the threshold.

I remember Paul Cook once saying that interest in any flower is in proportion to the activity and development of the particular flower, and this proved to be true.

I had become interested in breeding dwarfs and had used the *chamaeiris* forms for some time and had begun to realize that some new materials were needed. On a visit to the garden of Paul Cook I had seen a cold frame in which a number of plants of *I. pumila* were growing. I immediately knew that this was what I needed. Paul gave me a *pumila* seedling numbered Cook 1546, and from my first cross of it with a *chamaeiris* form I obtained in this progeny my 'Blarney' and 'Primus', a green amoena and a variegata form respectively. This was the first break out of the purple and yellow range. From here on we recognize the beginning of the modern era in dwarf iris.