

SIBERIAN IRISES

Don Witton

When we had a vote, on our 20th Anniversary, to find the South Pennine Group's favourite perennial, the iris came out top. I'm not surprised, as there are a wealth of different forms and I've been told that it is possible to have an iris in flower every month of the year.

They have very beautiful flowers. They consist of upright petals in the centre of the flower, which are often called standards. These are surrounded on the outside by three large, colourful sepals that grow outwards or down, called falls. The base of the fall, which may be a different colour or have attractive veining, is known as the signal.

I'm not an expert on all forms of iris; I struggle to grow the bulbous winter-flowering *reticulata* varieties, and I have never grown the large, summer-flowering, bearded iris as I'm told they need space for the sun to bake the surface-growing rhizomes. I don't do space in my garden! But the type of iris I like best, and can grow well, is the Siberian iris, and there are plenty to choose from.

Iris sibirica, which comes from Europe and west Asia, likes a moisture-retentive soil, grows up to one metre tall, and has long, tapering, grass-like foliage, never broader than one centimetre. It has thinner rhizomes than the bearded iris and they grow downwards into the ground, giving plants a standard 'clumping perennial' look. Although my garden dries out in the summer, these iris perform well for me in sun or part-shade, and I have acquired some excellent plants over the years. The flowers start to appear in May, on long slender stems (never needing any support), and will open in sequence until the end of June. Over the years, plants will make large, thick clumps, and regular division (in winter) is recommended, to maintain vigour and good flower production.

As with many types of iris, the predominant colour of the Siberians is blue or violet, but there are other colours and colour combinations. Over the next two pages are some of the varieties that I grow and like, but there are lots more available, so do check them out; I can highly recommend these easy-to-grow perennials that produce wonderful, interesting flowers from spring to early summer.

I. sibirica 'Butter and Sugar'

The name is unusual but very apt, as the standards are sugar-white with hints of yellow at the base, and the falls are a creamy, butter colour with brighter yellow signals.



All photos © Don Witton

***I. sibirica* 'Dance Ballerina Dance'**

This cultivar, with a rather unusual name, has ruffled pale blueish-white standards. The palest lilac-pink falls are unusual in having yellow signals with purple veining.



***I. sibirica* 'Snow Queen'**

Various cultivars named 'Snow... ' introduce white flowers to the palette, and the one I grow is 'Snow Queen'. It has white standards and falls, but the signals are yellow. The yellow does not detract from the whiteness of the bloom, and this plant earns its keep in my white border.



***I. sibirica* 'Melton Red Flare'**

In flower, this plant was an impulse buy, as I loved the colour. It is not red, but a very unusual strident cerise colour, with the veined signals being yellow and white.



***I. sibirica* 'Silver Edge'**

This is a stand-out-from-the-crowd blue form, as all three rich blue falls have a distinct, silver-white edge. The flowers are big and very showy. I have two large clumps which make an eye-catching sight when spring is in full flow, in late May.



***I. sibirica* 'Flight of Butterflies'**

The flowers are smaller than those of *I. 'Silver Edge'*, but more abundant. Standards are rich purple. The falls are white and are heavily veined with purple lines. It is an exquisite, free flowering form.

