

On the Steep Part of the Learning Curve ...Growing LAs in Pots in Kiddie Pools

by Harold Peters*

I was the bulletin editor for Region 14 for a while. One of my rules on garden articles required the author to describe the general garden and climate conditions. I felt that readers should understand at the beginning if the article they were about to read had any similarity to their garden conditions. Therefore, the rest of this paragraph is a brief description of my garden. Our 5-acre lot includes the top of a hill and about 3 acres is a 20 to 30 degree slope to the north. The view is great and different in all directions. The garden is about 25 miles east of downtown Sacramento in the beginning of the Sierra Nevada foothills. The climate is classic Mediterranean with hot, dry summers and cool, wet winters. One of the local nurseries had instructions for planting a lawn. The handout characterized the native soils as red adobe clay softened with rocks. The garden is commercial because my wife nagged me into admitting that it made sense since the garden at that time was over 1100 cultivars and close to an acre in irises. The garden has been as high as 2000 cultivars. Currently the dominant planting is recent tall beardeds with over 200 medians and some Louisianas (LAs), spurias, pacific coast irises, arilbreds and about five species. I am doing the marketing for another garden in the area and the other garden will be growing larger quantities of stock than I can with my terrain and limited well water.



The author preparing to divide a pot of Louisiana irises at Beautiful View Iris Garden in California.

Photo courtesy of Ron Schwartzman

Several years ago I had a nice collection of LAs in two beds. The older bed had started as a combination Siberian and Louisiana bed but had been converted to an all LA bed when the Siberian bed was expanded and moved to a location that had a better visibility for sales. A second bed was started in 2001 and included Region 14 2002 Spring Convention guests. The two beds were heavily mulched for water conservation and weed control. A gopher got in the older bed and ate the entire thing in almost a methodical manner. My usual gopher control measures did not work. When the gopher moved

to the second LA bed and started on the guest irises, emergency measures had me digging up the bed and putting the remaining rhizomes in buckets until I could figure out what to do. From the Louisiana iris listserv [lairs@yahoo.com], I knew some on the list were growing LAs in pots in kiddie pools. I decided to try that, figuring that at least I would not have a gopher problem.

I am still in the learning curve on growing LAs in pots in kiddie pools. Algae, mosquitos, water appearance and fertilizer are the most significant questions that have come up so far. The

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The author wielding a mallet to separate the rhizomes from their containers.

Photo courtesy of Ron Schwartzman

algae and water appearance problems kind of cleared up on their own. I have made it standard practice to put weed control fabric strips over the drainage holes in the bottom of the pots. And I will not try to save my back by filling a pot with soil/compost while it is in the pool. These steps are to minimize the amount of dirt that gets into the kiddie pool.

Initially I could not find a source of mosquito fish. Finally a knowledgeable clerk at the local feed supply company recommended feeder gold fish at 15 for \$1. The feeder gold fish worked very well in controlling mosquito larvae. I have one 4" goldfish from the initial supply.

Heather Pryor of Australia solved my fertilizer problem. I had been filling the kiddie pools close to the brim. This flooded the pots, put the rhizomes below water level and dissolved the fertilizer into the entire pool. Heather made a comment in an email to the LA iris email group that it was not necessary to fill the pools that high. Half full on the kiddie pools was adequate. Now the fertilizer stays in the pot. When I water, I put most of the water directly into the kiddie pool with a spray wand to give

the fish some oxygen. However, I also spray the leaves and the top of the pot to wash some fertilizer down to the root zone.

This was all preparation for what I am doing now. Some of the pots had been undisturbed for more than two years and were seriously overgrown. Some rhizomes broke through the sides of the heavy walled pots. Other rhizomes actually climbed over the sides of the pots. I did not try to market the LAs this past year except for some 1 gallon pots of leftovers from a Sacramento Iris Society sale. There were a large number of smallish rhizomes along with some retail size rhizomes. I offered for the lot and the sales chair immediately accepted the offer because he had no idea what to do with the leftovers. The kiddie pools are in a very visible place for visitors looking at the TBs. Several customers wrote up orders for some LAs even though I did not have a price established for what they wanted to buy. One of those customers just set a date to pickup his order. I gave him the total and requested that he bring a 5 gallon bucket to take the rhizomes home in water. He responded something about a "bucket of money, ha, ha,

ha."

When I started preparation for filling the LA orders, I discovered I faced a serious challenge, a lot of work, and a serious oversupply of rhizomes. A quick email to the LA-iris email group about a marvelous opportunity brought the oversupply problem into control. That left the physical problem of getting the rhizomes out of the pots. It has been a real battle so I have mentally phrased the process in military siege terms. The process goes something like this:

1. Cut off supply of water.

Remove the pot from the pool or let the pool go dry. Wet pots are heavier and dirtier and slimy. Hand water from above if the pots start to get too dry.

2. Pound vigorously on outer

defensive structure to loosen up defense. I use a small rubber mallet to pound on the outside of the pot to loosen the bond between the soil and the pot. I hit almost every square inch of the sides and the bottom. If the pot is wet, this is very messy and unpleasant.

3. Remove outer defensive

structure. I have a wire closet shelf supported by two stacks of cinder blocks. I tip the pot over so the edge of the shelf supports the edge of the pot. I then beat on the pot and bounce it up and down to loosen the clump from the pot. My left palm holds the edge of the pot and I use my fingers to prevent the clump from falling to the ground. Once the clump is loose, the pot is removed. This is not near as easy as it may sound. I am using 7.5 gallon "squat" pots that are 14" in diameter and 11" tall. The clump can weight as much as 50 pounds. Last year I thought I needed more pots so I bought 10 gallon pots that are 17.5" in diameter by 12" tall. The thinking, if it can be called that, was the 10 gallon pot had more capacity and was the closest I could find to the 7.5 gallon size which was not available anymore. After unpotting 18 7.5 gallon

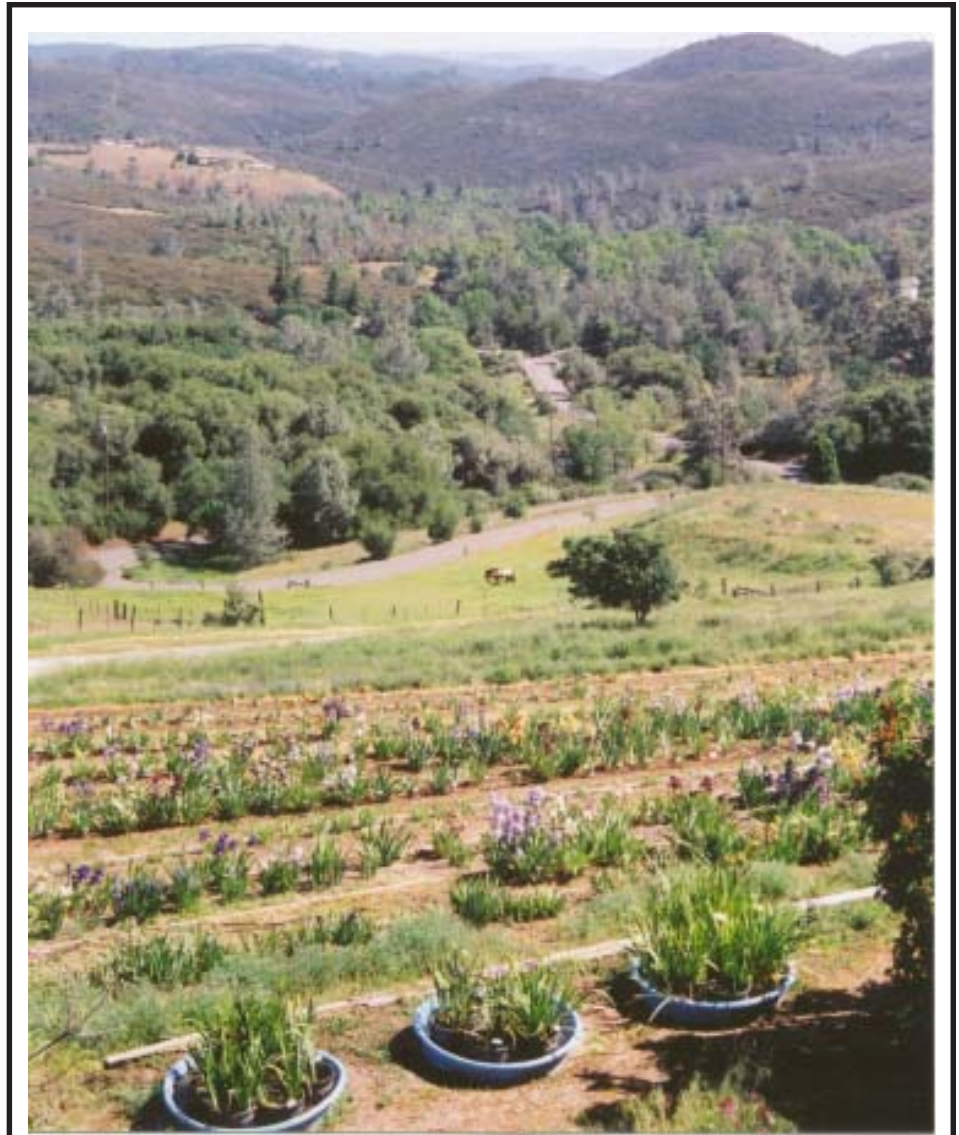
pots, I will not be using the 10 gallon pots for rises. If anyone wants some squat 10 gallon pots, please call me as I have a bargain to discuss.

4. *Use hatchet to reduce defensive forces by half.* When you remove the pot, the soil and root mass are one. Not an ounce of soil falls off the bottom. I use a hatchet to cut the soil/root mass in half.

5. *Use water cannon to further reduce defensive forces and create weakness in outer defensive ring.* I then use a water nozzle on “full force” to remove more of the soil from the bottom of the clump and to create an opening in the side of the clump.

6. *Exploit weakness created by using massive force to break down defense.* Once I get a weak area in the side of the clump, I pull the clump apart to get to the individual rhizomes. I normally take a chunk out that has 3 to 4 rhizomes and most of the soil for those rhizomes. This is what I replant for next years clump. All rhizomes go into a 5 gallon bucket with enough water to cover the roots and rhizome. A friend gave me a lot of buckets and almost all are in use as this article is being written. I will have to admit that four buckets have Siberians that I have to plant or pot.

7. *Use water cannon to break up small groups of defensive forces.* Use the water nozzle to clean rhizomes so they can be shipped or given to the customers. I put the name stake from the clump in the bucket with the starter clump for next year. The name stakes with stainless steel wire legs sold by Iris City Gardens in Tennessee are perfect for the wet environment in the pots. I put the individual rhizomes into a second, and third, if necessary, bucket. I put a piece of miniblind with the name of the cultivar in the buckets with the rhizomes. I have all buckets with the same cultivar touching each other and do not allow buckets with different cultivars to touch. There are lots



This image makes clear how Beautiful View Iris Garden got its name. Note kiddie pools in foreground.

Photo courtesy of Harold Peters

of other ways to keep track of the cultivars. Consistency to the chosen method is critical. Once the leaves have dried from the separation process, the cultivar name can be written on the center leaf.

Conclusion

I will not claim to be an expert on Louisiana irises. However the slope of the learning curve for growing LAs in pots appears to be less steep for the future. I am going to officially declare the Beautiful View Iris Garden to be a commercial garden for Louisiana irises by listing it in the *SLI Newsletter* vendor section. I will have 1 gallon pots

for walk-in customers. One advantage of pots is that I can sell and even ship almost any time of year. But the real lesson for this year was don't let the pots get overcrowded. Now, all I have to do is to learn on a cultivar by cultivar basis how to plant so the pot does not get overcrowded in a year.

