

Bloom Time Down Under: Experiencing Louisiana Irises in Australia

By Donna Wolford*

Crossing the international date line and the equator were two of the many interesting things about our recent trip to Australia. Our 747 jumbo jet, flying at 41,000 feet and traveling 649 miles per hour, was filled with Aussies headed home. The women's soccer team, "The Matildas," were Sydney-bound after playing matches in Washington state. Actually, there were more rugby fans on their way to the World Cup games being played throughout Australia during the month of October than there were tourists like us. It was a 15-hour nonstop flight, thankfully uneventful, except for a beautiful sunrise shortly before our arrival in New South Wales.

When we left Florida on September 29, autumn had just begun and the temperatures were beginning to cool down. However, when we arrived in Sydney, spring had just begun and, although the weather was fairly cool, I never did figure out the temperatures since they were given in centigrade. We knew it was spring since forsythia was blooming everywhere. The Louisiana irises were especially beautiful, as were the tulips and the cherry trees.

We arrived at Sydney/Kingsford Airport at 6:30 a.m. on October 1 (note: we lost September 30). Bernard and Heather Pryor were there to meet us. After getting us settled into our apartment in Hornsby, a suburb of Sydney,

the Pryor's took us to their garden... Iris Haven. I had seen many pictures of irises taken at Iris Haven, but to be standing in the middle of their garden looking at the beautiful blooms, I realized we were really in Australia! We were taken on tour, up close and personal, to each flower (by Heather) and saw our favorite Pryor irises waiting to greet us. New introductions and definitely a favorite of mine, 'Renee Fleming' was blooming as was 'Crushed Ice,' 'Peaches in Wine,' 'Jive Talkin',' 'Rich Incentive,' and 'Web of Intrigue.' Janet Hutchinson's 'Pastiche' and 'Singer of Songs' were both showing off for our early arrival. Still suffering from "jet lag" and feeling a bit "woosy," I slipped and landed right in the middle of a tall, elegant, creamy clump of 'Crushed Ice' in full bloom! I definitely knew, then, that we were in the much dreamed of Iris Haven.

Since blue irises are my favorites, I was drawn to them. Beautiful specimens of 'Jacaranda Lad,' 'Swords Drawn,' 'Captain Gates,' 'Queen Jeanne,' 'Deep Sea Quest,' and 'Sydney Harbor' (not yet introduced)



'Jacaranda Lad'

Photo by Heather Pryor

are all various shades of blue, but as beautiful as they are, none are as beautiful as the new, soon-to-be-introduced, 'Donna Wolford.' That's right! Heather and Bernard have named a blue iris with a thin white halo, white and blue variegated reverse and yellow signal highlighted with white for "yours truly." The blue is a Williamsburg blue, however, the Australian hybridizers probably call that an "Aussie sky blue" and the description is my version of what I saw, not that of the Pryors. Nevertheless, that particular blue iris stood tall and elegant and had five blooms open on one

*Donna Wolford lives in retirement in Florida. She and her husband, SLI board member Harry Wolford, recently spent several weeks enjoying the iris bloom season in Australia.



'Captain's Gate'

Photo by Heather Pryor



'Eastman Winds'

Photo by Harry Wolford



'Susan B. Anthony'

Photo by Heather Pryor



'Singer of Songs'

Photo by Harry Wolford



'Queen Jeanne'

Photo by Harry Wolford



'Renee Fleming'

Photo by Harry Wolford

stalk that would have won a blue ribbon in any show ... anywhere ... anytime! So watch for it in the future on the Iris Haven website and their future catalogs.

Not to get carried away here, I also saw blooming in the garden three other "Pryor ladies," the beautiful 'Ann Hordern,' 'Pamela Cameron' and, the not yet introduced, 'Susannah Fullerton.' In addition to seeing these beautiful flowers, I got to meet each of the lovely ladies for whom Heather had names these irises. Pam and Robert Cameron came for tea in the Pryor's garden to meet us. Another day, Suzanna Fullerton and her husband Ian came for tea at the garden. All work stopped when it was tea time for that is an English tradition. Heather put on the water to heat and Bernard served the delicious cookies which we enjoyed as we relaxed and got to know each other. The traditional ceremony made each visit to the garden very special. Janet and Ted Hutchinson also came one day for tea with us. Janet is a popular Australian hybridizer in her own rights. Here again, I realized I was definitely in Australia.

Each time we visited the garden, which could be three or four days apart, we saw many new blooms. 'Eastman Winds' and 'Susan B. Anthony,' two irises that are part of the project for the Pacific Flora 2004 International Horticulture Exhibition in Hamamatsu, Japan and the

Iris Friendship Garden at Highland Park in Rochester, New York, were finally blooming in all of their glory on our last visit to the garden. A very bad hail storm had done quite a bit of damage to the garden the week before our departure, but things were back to normal in a few days. On the day of our departure, October 29, the garden was an array of colors. Every shade and hue of pink, blue, yellow, and purple were truly a “floral rainbow” beyond description. Neither of us wanted to leave and miss the anticipated beauty of more blooms, but we were lucky enough to have been there at peak season.

We arrived back in the USA on the same day we left Sydney gaining back the day we had lost on the trip down. However, it was fall at home, not spring. We not only had “jet lag” to contend with, but we also had a time warp to cope with. Whether we like it or not, we are facing winter. It was wonderful to have enjoyed spring twice in one year.

We feel honored and privileged to have been the guests of Bernard and Heather who graciously shared their beautiful home and garden in Turrumurra with us. We were also tourists in the beautiful Blue Mountains, Royal Botanical Gardens of Sydney, and Floriade at Canberra the nation’s Capitol, and enjoyed a cruise around beautiful Sydney Harbour on Captain Cook Tours. We toured the Jenolan Caves, the Sydney Opera House, and got to see pet “Henry,” the Hordern cat of ‘Hordern’s Henry’ fame that was staying with the Pryors while we were there. We rode a scenic railway to the bottom of the gorge to Jamison Valley to see Katoomba Falls and then survived the steep ride up the mountain facing backward.

Australia is famous for its wildflowers and on every stroll we took through a national park we spotted many varieties. Bernard knew the names of every one of them. My favorite wild flower was the “Kangaroo Paw” which was abundant in a variety of reds, greens and blacks. There are many different varieties in various heights and whether they were in a botanical garden or growing as weeds in the bush, the colors were spectacular.

Our visit to New South Wales was one we will always remember. While the country was unbelievably beautiful, the people were equally so. Granted, they could not always understand our “version” of English, but we had difficulty with theirs as well. That was about the only “culture shock” we experienced. (I was disappointed that no one called me “mate,” but maybe Bernard will the next time he and Heather are in the USA). We came to appreciate rugby fans, loved the Tim Tam cookies, learned to survive driving on the “wrong” side of the road and anticipated having tea at 10:00 a.m. and 3:00 p.m., and sincerely hope we can go again to the “Country Down Under.”



Three views of ‘Donna Wolford.’ The bottom photo features Heather Pryor (l) and the iris’ namesake Donna Wolford. Top two photos by Heather Pryor; third photo by Harry Wolford