



An artist's
**LIVING
RAINBOW**
restored



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Sarah Cook reveals how she rescued these beautiful irises and is bringing them to a wider audience at RHS Chelsea Flower Show in 2015

To be allocated space in the Grand Pavilion at the RHS Chelsea Flower Show, to exhibit my National Plant Collection of Tall Bearded *Iris* bred by acclaimed artist and plantsman Sir Cedric Morris, is a dream come true. I was born, brought up in (and retired to) the area close to the East Anglian School of Painting and Drawing at Benton End, Hadleigh Suffolk, run by Morris and his partner Lett Hains. It is here he made a fine garden and bred irises. Chelsea was certainly not in my mind when I began making the Collection in 2004, shortly after my retirement. The Collection has developed a long way since then.

WHOLESALE LINK

It was not long before I realised that collecting and researching is only one side of making a National Collection, and that equally important is propagating and disseminating the plants, in as large a quantity as possible, to ensure their future survival. This is where Morris' irises have 'struck lucky'. Suffolk is also the home of Howard Wholesale Nurseries, one of the foremost British wholesale herbaceous plant nurseries, moreover one which grows a high proportion of their plants in the 'open ground' – ideal for irises.

Encouraged by my husband Jim (National Collection Holder of *Dianthus* (Malmaison)) I took a selection of the irises for owners David Howard and his daughter Christine to look at. Like me they admired their form, colours,

■ Left: The National Collection on a summer morning in the garden at Hullwood Barn in Suffolk

their obvious artistry. They have been growing Morris irises for in the open ground for seven years and there is now a large stock of plants for this project. It was completely unexpected when David suggested we should mount a joint exhibit at Chelsea, I didn't hesitate to grab the opportunity to show the irises to such a large audience.

It is a chance in a lifetime to be working with Howard Nurseries. Without their input this project would not have been possible and it is a thrill to be working with a Suffolk company (and a fellow Ipswich Town Football Club supporter!) If you are coming to the Chelsea Show please come and see us.



© Audrey Tyerman

ARTIST AS PLANT BREEDER

Morris named about 90 irises, of which 25 are in the Collection, obtained from private sources and Botanic Gardens in Britain, Europe and USA. Almost certainly most of the rest have been lost from cultivation. The exhibit is intended to showcase his existing irises and illustrate Morris' importance as a breeder in the mid-20th century. We will be showing some of the irises bred by his contemporaries, including the American breeder Paul Cook, with whom he swapped pollen for his breeding programme.

Morris is credited with breeding the first truly 'pink' iris, 'Edward Windsor'. It is recorded that another of his line of pinks, 'Strathmore' was shown to H. M. Queen Elizabeth at Chelsea in 1948 who "...graciously consented to have it named 'Strathmore' after her own home."

THE CHELSEA EXHIBIT



© Cherryl Fountain

The exhibit in the Grand Pavilion will make the connections between Sir Cedric Morris as an artist, plantsman and iris breeder. It will have a large planting of Morris irises and a studio area with vases of iris. All the irises for the display are growing in Melcourt's peat-free Sylvamix® Potting mix.

The garden and studio areas will be enhanced by backdrops painted by Cherryl Fountain. Cherryl has also worked on Gold Medal winning exhibits of the Malmaison carnations at the Hampton Court Flower Show and her work has been regularly exhibited in the RA summer exhibition.





■ Iris 'Benton Menace'



■ Iris 'Strathmore'



■ Iris 'Benton Blue John'

© Alison Sargeant

THE IMPORTANCE OF THESE CONSERVED IRISES

Many of these cultivars were not known in 2004 when Sarah started collecting them. Since then a number have been available from the Collection on a limited scale. In the next few years, with the help of Howard Wholesale Nurseries, most will be available for the retail market.

CULTIVAR	SOURCE OF SARAH'S PLANTS	AVAILABILITY IN 2004
Benton Ankaret	Cambridge Botanics	not available 2004
Benton Apollo	Relative of Morris' gardener	not available 2004
Benton Argent	Private garden	not available 2004
Benton Arundel	Beth Chatto Gardens	available 2004
Benton Blue John	Collections in Basel, USA & Czech Republic	not known in UK 2004
Benton Caramel	several	available 2004
Benton Cordelia	several	available 2004
Benton Daphne	Collections in Basel, USA & Czech Republic	not known in UK 2004
Benton Dierdre	several	available 2004
Benton Evora	Notcutts	available Notcutts 2004 since dropped
Benton Farewell	Private garden	not available 2004
Benton Judith	Basel	not known in UK 2004
Benton Lorna	several	available 2004
Benton Menace	Collections in Basel, USA & Czech Republic	not known in UK 2004
Benton Nigel	several	available 2004
Benton Nutkin	Private garden	not available 2004
Benton Olive	Private garden	not available 2004
Benton Opal	Collections in Basel, USA & Czech Republic	not known in UK 2004
Benton Pearl	Collections in Basel, USA & Czech Republic	not known in UK 2005
Benton Primrose	Cambridge Botanics	not available 2004
Benton Susan	Private garden	incorrectly named 2004
Storrington	Private garden	not available 2004
Strathmore	Private garden	not available 2004
Craithe	Sissinghurst	not available 2004
Edward Windsor	several	available 2004