

The Bob Nichol Birmingham Iris Collection

Winter 2021/22 – an update from plot 68b

Sue Griffith

At the beginning of June 2021, you might have seen some of Bob's iris flowering on the allotments for the first time since 1996. If you are a new plotholder and missed them, then you will get a surprise in June 2022, when there should be lots of flowers.

Just to recap - Bob Nichol grew and hybridised Tall Bearded Iris on the Harborne Hill allotment site from about 1970 until shortly before his death in 1996. He was a judge for the British Iris Society and won many prizes on the show bench for his iris. He had two and a half plots at our site - 46a next to the lockers at the Nursery Road end, plot 50 and plot 69 (at the Harborne Hill End – photo right).



A couple of our older plotholders do remember Bob and his flowers. Between 1984 and his untimely death in 1996, Bob created and registered 22 new irises. After his death, his allotments were cleared and a nursery took all the plants away. Bob's widow, Jean registered a further 21 introductions. Bob and Jean named most of his creations after the people and places in the Poldark series of books from 1975. During lockdown, I had the wacky, rather romantic idea of bringing back some of Bob's iris to the allotment site.



By June 2021, I had been given 8 different coloured iris (cultivars) by members of the British Iris Society. Four of these different cultivars had flower buds and despite being in pots, grew magnificent flowers. (They were in pots as I was still renovating my plot, taken on in September 2020.) I put them by my shed so that as many people as possible could see them. I think they are very beautiful.

However, all was not as I had hoped! The rhizome I had been given as *Morwenna* didn't develop a lilac bud and bloomed bright shocking pink. The ones I had bought as my very first Nichol iris from Holland, *Elizabeth Poldark* just didn't look right – they were the right colour, but all floppy instead of looking crisp and strong. I felt I didn't really know what I was doing after all.





Nevertheless, *Amadora* (left) and *Demelza* (below) put on a great show. Their beauty convinced me that I was on the right track.



Since then, I've been given or bought more cultivars and I now have 10, including replacements for the rogue pink one and the floppy white one. They arrived through the post in cardboard boxes, neatly labelled and disinfected (right).



In November 2021, Bob Nichol's daughter gave me two different cultivars from her London home which were not flowering as they had become too overshadowed by other plants. (*Prudy* below). She is so pleased her father's irises are being appreciated where they were created.



Many of the larger, older iris have been planted out - now its autumn, they have lost most of their leaves and look sad and bedraggled, but there are many new shoots growing out of the rhizomes. The soil must not cover the rhizomes, or they won't flower and may rot.



However the smaller ones are being kept under cover over the winter - they don't mind the cold, but they hate lots of rain and if they become constantly wet, they rot and die.

All the individual plants are numbered with long lasting numbered plastic tags and logged on a spreadsheet with photographs and provenance. If we ever want to have an official 'Collection', then this must be done, so it was simpler to do it right from the beginning. I have given Archie a copy, so that we all know what plants are where.

The collection is not just for me, but for all of us on the allotment site. Therefore, as soon as I have enough of each cultivar, they are now being passed to 'foster parents' within our site for other plot holders to grow and enjoy. Their unique label stays with them. This way we can all benefit from their attractive appearance and our heritage, but also ensure that they never disappear from the site again. We have three 'foster parents' so far, so please get in touch if you would like a plant or two in 2022.

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