

The Willott Iris Garden: From Rescue Toward Renown

By Robert Pindell

Any burg can have a rose garden in their city park, but Cleveland, Ohio, is unusual and to be envied because it has an iris garden in one of its city parks.

The Willott Iris Garden is located on the grounds of the Rockefeller Greenhouse. The greenhouse is part of a 207 acre park that John D. Rockefeller donated to the City of Cleveland. The greenhouse and its surrounding gardens are the northern anchor for Rockefeller Park, which also contains Cleveland's famous Cultural Gardens.



Dorothy Willott at the garden

Sandra Pindell photo

The Beginnings

Tony and Dorothy Willott had been using a bit of land in the grounds surrounding the Rockefeller Greenhouse for many years. It all started in 1987, when they were asked to donate and then maintain a few irises in the Peace Garden at the greenhouse. The irises grew exceedingly well—as did the trees in the garden, shading out the irises.

Eventually the Willotts moved their irises to an unused area of the park and had around 2,000 clumps of iris in nearly a half mile of rows, where they did much of their hybridizing. People would come every spring to see the Willott's field of iris in bloom. But in the later years, the iris garden at the greenhouse became a hobby that was getting out of hand. Despite everything that Tony, Dorothy, and a few friends could do, the weeds took over.

Tony and Dorothy had been Master Gardeners for many years and had presented lectures on irises to the Gardeners of Greater Cleveland several times, so they were well known to both groups. In early 2008, shortly before he died, Tony approached the Gardeners of Greater Cleveland through Vince Staffileno, and the Cuyahoga County Master Gardeners Advisory Committee through Henry (Hank) Doll, for some help with weeding. Following Tony's death, the Master Gardeners Advisory

Committee wanted to do something to honor Tony and Dorothy for their horticultural accomplishments. Establishing an iris garden seemed the most appropriate way.

The job of organizing the project fell on the chair of the Master Gardener's Advisory Committee, Hank Doll. Hank decided that the project was too big for the Master Gardeners alone and that he needed to recruit other organizations to help in the effort. He recruited the Gardeners of Greater Cleveland for rescuers and the North East Ohio Iris Society for experts in iris cultivation.

One organization was ready-built to support an iris garden at Rockefeller Greenhouse. Friends of Greenhouse, a non-profit organization, had been formed some years before to function for the Rockefeller Greenhouse and surrounding gardens much as the National Park Conservancies do for the various National Parks.

Hank approached Vince Staffileno, a board member of Friends of Greenhouse, and Perrin Verzi, the manager of the Rockefeller Greenhouse, for their assistance in establishing an iris garden. The plan was to use some of the land that the Willotts had been using for their irises. Perrin and the Friends of Greenhouse, under the leadership of Vince, got permission from the City of Cleveland's Parks



The author with an offering of weeds for the compost pile.

Sandra Pindell photo

Department for the long-term use of the land, and some repurposed sandstone blocks for the perimeter of the garden. Friends of Greenhouse then provided the bulk of the money, nearly \$25,000, for the hardscape and initial potting supplies needed to rescue the irises in Tony and Dorothy's rows of irises in the park.

Rescuing the Irises

My wife Sandra and I are members of the Gardeners of Greater Cleveland, the North East Ohio Iris Society, and Friends of Greenhouse, so Hank recruited us to be the lead volunteers for the rescue of the irises from the weeds and the later maintenance of the garden. To provide the labor for the rescue, Hank, Vince, Sandra, and I recruited volunteers from all three organizations. These volunteers passed the word to their own local garden clubs, which resulted in a few volunteers from other area garden clubs, so the rescue had lots of people to get down in the weeds.

By the time we got organized to get into the Willott's rows of irises that summer of 2008, the weeds were three and four feet high and the irises were buried. With the careful use of a weed whacker, we found the rows of irises and started to pull weeds. The weeds we pulled must have added at least a ton of material to the park's compost heap

that year.

Once the weeds were removed, Dorothy Willott was very active identifying the irises, using her garden charts and the surviving plant markers. We got some irises dug and potted before it was too late in the year, but there were many left in place for the next year.

Over the winter of 2008-2009, we made plans to continue to rescue and replant the irises. The original plan for a 40 by 40 foot garden proved far too small for the plants available, and the garden's size was doubled before the first iris was planted.

In the summer of 2009, volunteers dug the surviving irises out of the regrown weeds and potted them to be planted in the

new Willott Iris Garden the next year. By the end of the 2009 growing season, the area where the Willott Iris Garden now stands was prepared and the majority of the surviving irises were rescued from the weeds.

The final rescue effort continued during the 2010 growing season and the new garden was laid out. By the end of the 2010 growing season, all the surviving irises had been dug from among the weeds and first irises were planted in the garden under



The rescue crew at work

Sandra Pindell photo

Dorothy's direction.



The garden takes shape

Sandra Pindell photo

In 2011, under Dorothy's direction, the rest of the rescued Willott irises were planted in the garden along with some additional donated irises. Now Sandra and I became lead volunteers for the maintenance of the Willott Iris Garden.

While not anywhere near a finished product, the garden was dedicated in the spring of 2012.

Growing Pains

From the very start the garden had two great problems:

First were the weeds, some of which I had never seen before. After years of weeds reaching maturity, the balance in the annual weed seed bank was large, indeed. There were also plenty of very tenacious perennial weeds to fight.

The second great problem was somewhat of our own making. By the 2010 growing season, many of the potted irises were no longer marked. The irises had spent two years in pots and many of the plant markers had faded to total illegibility. Some markers had simply disappeared. Other pots had been mis-marked when they were potted or their contents had been mixed.

Altogether it was a real recipe for disaster—but what was sliding

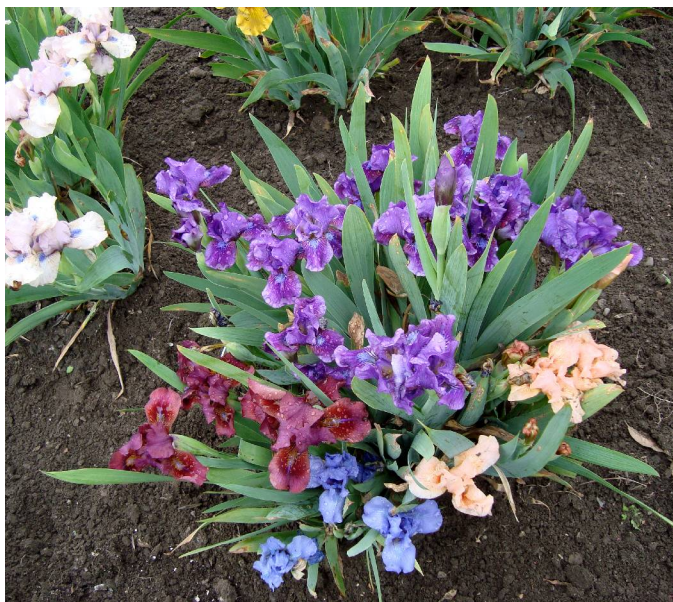
downhill toward disaster seven years ago, we now have pretty well under control.

Because we are in a public park that is in constant use, the city tightly regulates what, when, and how agricultural chemicals are used. Our weed control is see a weed, pull a weed. Diligent and persistent weeding has reduced the seed bank a great deal and the perennial weeds that were so rampant a few years ago are now only seen in the garden as



Dorothy & Bob work out the planting scheme

Sandra Pindell photo



Mixed clump, to say the least *Sandra Pindell photo*

problem. There are still a few noids and merged clumps, but they are getting fewer and fewer.

seedlings.

The weeding gets us right down in the clumps of irises so we can look them over at close range to see what is going on with them. If there is borer damage or rot, it is quickly noticed. While we are there we groom the plants, removing spent bloom stalks and dead, damaged, and dying iris leaves, as well as fallen tree leaves.

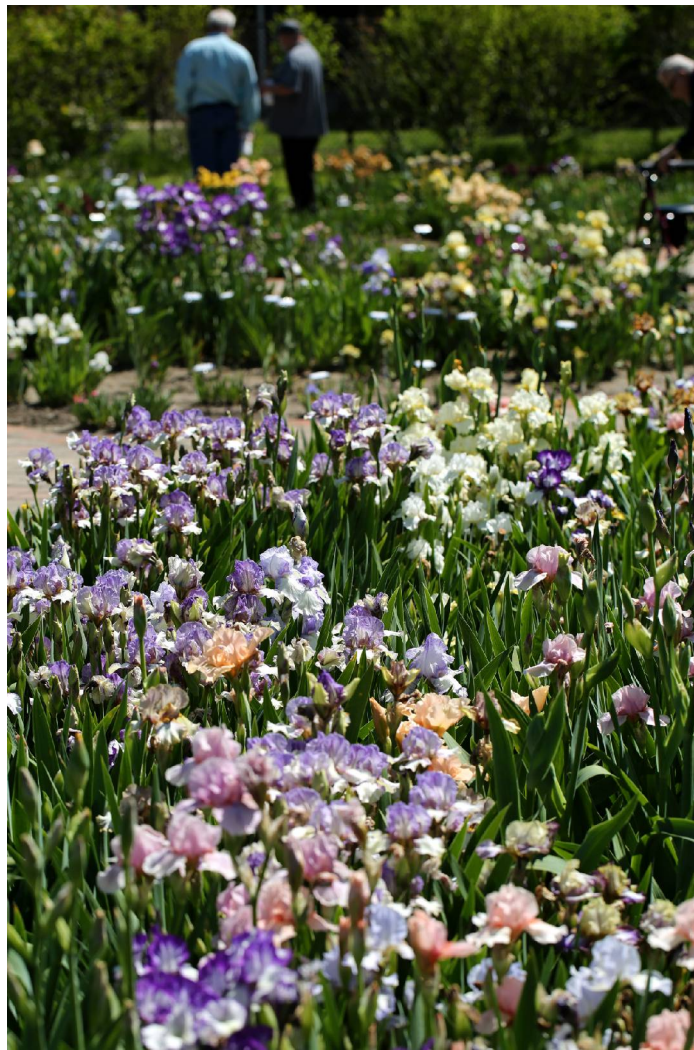
The Willott Iris Garden is a display garden in a city park, so it doesn't just get weeded and groomed, it gets polished. As a result of such careful garden sanitation, we have almost no borer problem and very little rot.

We have almost fixed the marker problem. We use stainless steel markers with laser-printed waterproof paper labels. The information for the labels comes directly from a map key database using a mail merge program. The blank labels are expensive, as is the printing, and we only get a little over a year out of many of the labels before they fade to the point that they cannot be read. As we find time, we are adding a redundant marker, a white plastic table knife buried with only a half inch exposed in the middle of the clump, with the same information as the steel marker. The heavy-duty white plastic table knives are easily available and are cheaper and more durable than most of the available plastic markers. We use industrial strength Sharpies to write on the knives. If the writing on the knife is exposed above the soil it will fade in a year or at the most two, but any writing on the buried portion of the knife will last many years.

We have nearly fixed the identification

As we planted the garden, we planted many clumps of irises in the hope of identifying them when they bloomed. In the bloom seasons of 2011 through 2017, Dorothy had a pretty good success rate identifying the unknown irises, especially her own introductions. After the end of the 2017 bloom season, we have only a few noids left. We think that a few of the noids may be named irises of other hybridizers and the rest are mostly un-named seedlings, either Willott's that were never numbered or from bee pods that escaped deadheading; these may never be identified.

We also had a pretty good success rate with the mixed clumps, correctly identifying the individual cultivars and getting them into clumps by themselves.



The Willott Iris Garden in bloom

Brock Heilman photo

volunteer hours, and they were a great help. Then, just about the time that they knew what they were doing and were ready to be trained on another task, they would have their required hours and we would not see them again.

To keep the irises of the Willott Iris Garden presentable and healthy requires about 1,500 person-hours a year, not something that Sandra and I could do by ourselves. So Hank Doll, because of his fund raising experience for non-profits, has become the garden's fund raiser. With Hank's efforts for the last three years, the Willott Iris Garden has been able to hire Ron Hartmiller, a part-time (80 hours/month, 7 months a year,) trained person to serve as docent, volunteer coordinator, and executive gardener. Sandra

and I volunteer at least 600 hours a year, and with our paid docent/gardener we cover a little more than 1,200 of the 1,500 person-hours required to maintain the garden. We get a few people from the Gardeners of Greater Cleveland, the

Moving Forward: Successes and Challenges

It is fairly easy to get gardeners to help with a rescue, and we had plenty of enthusiastic gardeners digging and potting irises that had been buried alive in the weeds. It is the kind of thing that catches people's imagination.

It is not hard to find gardeners to volunteer to plant a new garden. Again we had plenty of enthusiastic gardeners to help plant the Willott Iris Garden. After all, it was a new thing.

It is difficult, indeed, to get gardeners to volunteer to maintain a garden. Pulling weeds catches no one's imagination; it is what we do in our own gardens all the time. Deadheading and pulling dead leaves out of clumps doesn't catch the imagination of anyone, either, but it has to be done to perfection to meet the standard.

In the last couple of years, volunteers have become few and far between. We would get newly minted Master Gardeners in search of



SDBs in bloom

Sandra Pindell photo

Master Gardeners, and some other local garden clubs to help out. Although the park is open 365 days a year, the gates are only open from 10AM until 4PM, so we cannot work in the garden in the evening hours, which is when many volunteers have the time to help.

The 1,500 person-hours a year covers the bare minimum needs of the garden. The garden gets weeded, the irises get groomed, and the clumps that most need it get divided—and the rest wait till next year.

There is much more that needs to be done. The garden is not as well-organized as we would like. Our record-keeping is not as complete as it needs to be. We don't have redundant plant markers for all the clumps of iris. With another few hundred person-hours, we could get most of this fixed.

The garden's annual budget is \$10,000, which covers paying our part-time employee and buying consumable garden supplies, with a bit left over for contingencies and the purchase of irises to improve the collection. The garden has received grants from a local foundation, totaling \$8,000 spread over four years, but there is no more money to be had there. We have been able to raise \$1,000-\$2,000 a year from the sale of potted irises. The rest of the money has come from donations from individuals and groups and the sale of personalized pavers.

The Willott Iris Garden conducts business as an ongoing project of Friends of Greenhouse. They have the nonprofit status to raise money and the standing with city hall to make it possible for the garden to exist in the park.

That is where the Willott Iris Garden is now, short-handed and living on a shoestring. It is in a city park with the blessing of the present city fathers and mothers. So as long as we don't rock the boat too hard, I think that the city will be happy for us to stay right where we are.

The Future

The garden can survive indefinitely just the way it is, raising a little money, having a part-time paid worker and a few volunteers.

But surviving is not enough. Status draws



'Jolly Jester' (Willott, 1983) IB

Brock Heilman photo

money. Being able to say that the Willott Iris Garden is an official display garden of the Historic Iris Preservation Society (now) and the American Iris Society (pending) is a great help; becoming a National Collection Garden would help, too.

Being able to say that we run the garden like a museum gives status, too. To say the garden is a museum means record-keeping is vital. We have the garden mapped. To make sure that the names on the map and the plant markers are correct and stay that way is a continuing task. The database that goes with the map and the map itself are a start, but we need a bed book with high quality portraits of each iris, check list description, other characteristics, plant location, and bloom record. I am actively recruiting a couple of photographers and a retired research librarian to make the record-keeping happen.

We have been too busy surviving to think about long-term funding and a secession plan, but we know we need to do that. We are looking into better, more stable ways of financing the garden. The secession plan is an even more difficult problem. If we must remove the irises from the park, what do we do with what we can dig up on the way out the door? What happens if we cannot pay a gardener, and there are no volunteers, and the garden fills with weeds? Who will run the rescue? We just hope that we keep ahead of the problems until we find the answers.

Maybe some of you can help. ☪

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Willott Iris Garden.*