

ALBUQUERQUE ARIL & IRIS SOCIETY

Albuquerque, NM

HISTORY

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No one can pinpoint when Albuquerque iris growers first came together to create an organization to share, learn, and show all things iris. The **New Mexico Iris Society (NMIS)** dates back to the 1950s, if not earlier, and once claimed to have had almost 200 members. It was largely considered a social club but with a rich history of influencing the proliferation of iris gardens throughout the region.

There were those who took the growing and hybridizing of iris more seriously and they formed the **New Mexico Iris Guild (NMIG)**. About the same time, influenced by Aril clubs in California, some of the NMIS members wanted to concentrate on the growing and development of **Aril** and **Arilbred** irises. By the 1960s, locally they had organized into the **Albuquerque Aril Society (AAS)**. In the 70s they listed over 100 members.

NMIS is one of the original garden clubs that helped create the Council of Albuquerque Garden Clubs formed in 1950. NMIS, AAS, and NMIG participated in the funding and building of the Albuquerque Garden Center in 1975, owned and operated wholly by the Council to this day.

There were several individuals who pursued hybridizing irises in the early years, particularly Howard Shockey and Pete McGrath. Other members of one or more of the organizations who were instrumental in their growth included (but are not limited to) Karen Bergamo, Barbara Figi, Phil Doonan, Valerie White, Reita and Scott Jordan, Irene Shockey, Ken Flanager, Helen Radebaugh, Marylee Adams, Cindy Rivera, Helen Crotty, and Patricia Randall. Several of them were or are AIS judges, and Bergamo and Randall were or are Regional Judges Chairs as well as past Regional Vice Presidents.

Because so many iris growers belonged to all three iris organizations (NMIS, NMIG, AAS), there were joint iris shows and sales off and on as early as the 1970s. By the 1990s, AAS and NMIS even held joint monthly meetings. According to treasurers' records, the income and costs of joint activities were shared equally,

although it was sometimes difficult to determine exactly how to assign costs. The lines between the clubs became even more blurred, as members would often be officers in first one and then the other. We think Cindy Rivera was once the president of all three groups at the same time. (It has always been a challenge to find members willing to serve as officers.)

Sadly, records of the New Mexico Iris Guild seem to have been lost, and the exact date of its termination is uncertain. But it was the first of the three clubs to disband.

During the 1980s and 90s, NMIS had a strong Acquisitions program ongoing, due to plenty of money in the treasury to purchase newer iris varieties. The program was eventually terminated mostly due to lack of participation, but also because the public at the rhizome sales was not willing to pay the higher price for more recently introduced iris.

By the 2000s, overall interest in gardening, and growing flowers in particular, waned in this region. The membership of both NMIS and AAS dwindled. At times AAS had as few as 15 members, and NMIS even fewer. It was becoming more and more difficult to find people willing to serve as officers. After many discussions of combining the two between 2002 and 2006, it was finally agreed to by a majority of members in both AAS and NMIS, and at the insistence of former AAS members, **in 2008 the official name became “Albuquerque Aril & Iris Society” (AAIS)** and the new bylaws were adopted.

To replace the Acquisitions program and insure a wider distribution of newer irises (and to make it easier for the members who are AIS judges to acquire recent introductions), a “Rhizome Raffle” was instituted. AAIS now places a club order each year, and one or more of the members pots them for the raffle at the September meeting. Members may purchase tickets at \$5 each, and every ticket is assured a recently introduced potted iris (the drawing determines the order in which ticket holders get to choose their prizes). If there are irises left over, a second round of ticket sales and drawings is held and so forth until all are gone. Members sometimes donate additional recently introduced rhizomes from their own gardens for the sale. The ticket sales largely offset the cost of the club order.

In addition to hosting the AIS Region 23 Annual Convention every four or five years, AAIS held a very successful four-day “Aril & Median Trek” in the spring of

2008, organized by Cindy Rivera, and featuring some of our members' gardens. That generated increased interest in other classes of irises, but Tall Bearded still dominate our shows and the interest of our customers at the sale, and we normally sell out of them. We do, however, include median and sometimes Arilbred irises among the potted irises that are snapped up at our shows and sales. Several hybridizers of the lesser-known classes of irises, especially Arils and Arilbreds, have come from among our ranks. Having members with a wealth of knowledge about all things iris has provided educational programs to other garden organizations as well as for our own membership.

One or two of our members are listed with the Master Gardeners at the Albuquerque Garden Center to respond to questions about growing irises. Our new website, albuquerquearilandirissociety.com, provides additional information, and we also have a Facebook page for the sharing of pictures and information.

While overall interest in growing iris is still popular in our area, willingness to keep track of named varieties has continued to decline. Participation in Iris Shows went from 30 to 40 people showing named irises in the 1990s, to fewer than 15 by 2015; the quantity of named iris competing for ribbons from almost a thousand, to less than a hundred. The annual rhizome sale profits went from upwards of \$6000 to \$8000 to less than \$2000, because fewer and fewer named rhizomes are available for sale. Much of this is due to the aging of the club members – physically unable to dig and divide, and to maintain correct identification within their iris gardens, or having to give up growing altogether – and lack of interest on the part of younger people to become “serious” growers.

These days, most of the buyers at our annual rhizome sale do not seem to care what variety they are or in keeping track of their names. They buy them based solely on the appeal of the photograph or the color. More frequently, they are asking for plants already potted; we sell out of any potted iris we have available during the annual Iris Show, or at our sale. Many of our younger members “inherited” yards full of iris that came with their house, and love growing them, but rigidly adhering to AIS requirements in order to compete in shows seems to be unimportant.

Those of us who belong to AAIS believe there will always be avid iris growers. In the past two years we have acquired a number of new members, most of them

newly retired. Our membership total now stands at 40, about double that of recent years. The AIS Iris Encyclopedia has greatly simplified classification and identifying irises, for which we are very grateful. We continue to work to educate and excite people about the growing and showing iris!

We will be hosting the 2020 AIS Region 23 Convention in August; come join us!

[Special thanks to those who provided input: Pete McGrath, Cindy Rivera, Helen Radebaugh, Patricia Randall, and all those down through the years who kept some of the records intact.]