

A close-up photograph of a large number of purple Pacific iris flowers in full bloom, surrounded by their characteristic long, narrow green leaves. The flowers are the central focus, with some in sharp focus and others slightly blurred in the background, creating a sense of depth. The overall scene is vibrant and lush.

Pacific Iris

Almanac of the Society for Pacific Coast Native Iris

www.pacificcoastiris.org

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Facebook favourites

A few of our favourite Facebook photographs of PCI in the Spring season 2020.



'Ocean Blue' Photo: Bob Sussman



'Blue a Fuse' Photo: Jane Jordan



Garry Knipe seedling 1138_5 Photo: Jane Jordan



Bob Sussman seedling



Bob Sussman seedling



Unselected seedling ex Ghio:
Photo Jane Jordan

Front cover: *Iris tenax* in Oregon

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The Society for Pacific Coast Native Irises (SPCNI) is a section of the American Iris Society (AIS).

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**PUBLICATIONS AVAILABLE
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Prices listed are for SPCNI members in the US.
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PRINT ARTICLES

Check List of named PCI species and cultivars, 2005
Lists species and named cultivars and hybrids to 2005. \$9.00
If ordering both print and CD checklist versions together,
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A Guide to the Pacific Coast Irises

Victor A. Cohen, 1967
Reprint of British Iris Society 1967 booklet, describing
species, sub-species and distributions. 40 pages, \$8.00

A Revision of the Pacific Coast Irises Lee W. Lenz,
1958 Reprint of Aliso journal article 5.5x8.5, 72 pages. \$8.00

Hybridization and Speciation in the Pacific Coast Irises

Lee W. Lenz, 1959. Reprint of Aliso article 72 pages, \$8.00
If ordering both of Dr. Lenz's reprints, \$14.00
All three volumes, \$20.00

Diseases of the Pacific Coast Iris

Lewis & Adele Lawyer, 1986. Fall 1986 Almanac, 22 pages,
\$4.50

Almanac Index, 2005,

includes the following indices: author, subject, species,
hybrids, \$4.00, or download free PDF from the SPCNI
website.

COMPACT DISCS

SPCNI Photo CD, 2009.

Compiled by Ken Walker, this CD includes 423 photos of
species and hybrids, neatly labeled. \$9.00.

Welcome to the Beauty of Pacific Coast Iris CD, 2009.

A 15-minute presentation with a concise overview of PCN
species, early hybridizers, Mitchell Medal winners,
gardens landscaped with PCIs, and culture tips.
Ready to play for individuals or groups, \$9.00

USERS GROUP ON YAHOO:

SPCNI has a users group site at
<http://tech.groups.yahoo.com/group/PacificIris/>.
Members are encouraged to join this group, which provides
a simple online way to ask questions about finding and
growing PCIs. To join this site, you must register with
Yahoo, but do not need a Yahoo e-mail account. You may
post photos here, check on scheduled activities, and contact
other SPCNI members.

Editor's notes

Kia ora from New Zealand

There is an old Chinese saying—'May you live in
interesting times', and I do not think there has ever
been a more interestingly timed iris season for those
of you in the Northern Hemisphere for many years.
This is due to the insidious spread of Covid-19.

This strange sense of isolation feels odd enough in
New Zealand, coming as it does on the back of a
plant-killing drought. Here autumn has arrived,
with some rain for our neck of the woods, but the
deciduous trees think it is a month or more further
on into the season and are losing leaves. The world
feels like it is slowly going into hibernation.

I can only imagine what it must be like to be going
into a spring where everything is in lockdown. You
possibly have extra time to enjoy your own irises,
but no chance to share them with others, no chance
to get out into the wild to see them in their natural
habitat, and sadly, the AIS convention, an
important one to mark the centennial, has had to be
canned as well.

In common with many gardening organisations, our
members are not Generation X, Millennials or
Generation Z—most of us are Baby Boomers.
We are the very people who are at most risk from
Covid-19, so we must take extra care to keep
ourselves safe.

We have pulled together a mini, digital only *Pacific
Iris* to help you get through the anxious times ahead.
There's a piece from Bob Sussman about why
landscapers do not use PCI more, and a tribute to
Dr. Lee Lenz, the remarkable scientist and iris
breeder who passed away late last year. We have
reprinted an article by Richard Richards about *Iris
munzii*, as it refers to Dr. Lenz and his well-
regarded work with this important species.

Gardeners are usually an optimistic lot—we would
not garden if we weren't. So this season, take care,
enjoy the plants in your gardens, and we'll have a
full issue next time.

Gareth

Why are Pacific Coast Irises not used more often in landscapes? Like a lot more?

SPCNI President, and commercial nursery owner
Bob Sussman asks why PCI are not used more often in commercial plantings. He provides the photographs too.

As many of you know we are a “mostly” California native plant nursery located in Ventura County. My realtor friends might phrase it as ‘Los Angeles adjacent’. People in Los Angeles often think of themselves as being on the edge of change - social, style, and of course environmental or what may be referred to as...”woke”.

That means, among other things, sustainable landscapes. Sustainable landscapes would translate to minimal resource use (including time to maintain) and still be aesthetically attractive as well as providing the opportunity for a wide biodiversity. Los Angeles County has about 10 million people, the neighboring counties about the same combined. Given all this, one would think there should be a lot of demand for Pacific Coast Irises, but no, at least for now.



Iris chrysophylla in Oregon

What exactly are Pacific Coast Irises? They are irises native to the coastal regions of California above Santa Barbara and up into Washington State, with some in the Sierra Nevada and San Bernardino mountain ranges. In the field they tend to have a very charming and colorful appearance. The flowers range in size to about 2” to 3” across, fairly big for the wild and native.

A mass planting of these iris natives has an aesthetic quality that’s about as good as it gets – it is very difficult to make changes and get a better result.



Iris innominata in Oregon

Still, plant people being what they are, they cross these wild species again and again to get more colorful flowers. The hybrids are also much bigger, averaging between 4” and 5” across when in full bloom or roughly 3x larger than the typical species. Some work has also been done on increasing the growing range as well. The result of some of this work is absolute living art. Here are a “few” of mine –I’m not sure if this would constitute living art but I do not need permission to publish my own photos:



Bob Sussman seedling



Bob Sussman seedling

Certainly, many other hybridizers that have been doing this for years have grown as beautiful or better Pacific Coast hybrids as I have. You can see their work on the web—just type in “Pacific Coast Irises” and click images, or the Society for Pacific Coast Native Iris has many of these.

Now we finally get to the really big questionwhy aren't more of these used in landscapes or a least native landscapes?

I do have some idea as to why these irises are not used much more often in various landscapes, but I also asked some of our clients that do garden design work. These are people that design very extensive gardens for the rich and famous (or so they think) down to the more modest residential gardens for the real people. I also checked with some of my buddies at botanic gardens.



Bob Sussman seedling

The consensus seems centered around two points. The first of these is “lack of information” leading to what might be called risk aversion. The second is lack of supply.

Let's take the first point first - lack of information and risk aversion. A professional landscape design person is on the “hook” for both the artistic appeal of the design plus its durability. Will it last? Will it perform as promised? If the plants fail then it's just a giant mess. The designer's reputation is severely damaged, or ‘worse’ they may have to replace the plant material at their own expense. So, without knowledge and confidence as to the performance of specific plant material, no matter how beautiful, the rational decision is one of avoidance.



Bob Sussman seedling

What's the truth? How difficult are these irises to grow? In Northern California, Oregon, Washington State, and other areas around the world with a similar climate, they're pretty easy to grow. The West Coast is part of their natural range. You can see them growing on the hillsides and meadows and people seem accept that growing them in residential or commercial landscapes is no big challenge. A few hundred miles to the south in Southern California, it's warmer, drier, and the soils tend to be a bit different. They will not be found growing along the coast and so local gardeners do not get the idea that they are easy to grow in the garden.

However, in Southern California, there are several examples of Pacific Coast Irises growing prolifically in botanical gardens. The Santa Barbara Botanic Garden has several sections devoted to Pacific Coast Irises. However, Santa Barbara is also cooler, gets more rain and is fairly close to their native range (*I. douglasiana* starts in northern Santa Barbara County).

The climate in Santa Barbara is similar to the coast areas from there all the way down to San Diego. This may be a good example of how they do in coastal California or other regions with the same conditions.

But what about more inland? Just a little more inland from the ocean can make a big difference.

The Rancho Santa Ana Botanica Garden in Claremont, California also does an outstanding job with their Pacific Coast Irises. Unlike Santa Barbara they have very warm summers with several days above 100 degrees. Anyone that's been to Disneyland in the summer knows it's hot!



PCI at Rancho Santa Ana Botanic Garden

I do have to admit: as the temperatures get warmer the challenges do get greater. Still, the range in which this particular type of plant material can be successfully grown is fairly broad.



PCI at Rancho Santa Ana Botanic Garden

If your climate is just like that of California's coast north of Santa Barbara (Santa Barbara is about 100 miles north of Los Angeles) these will grow easily.

Plant them out in sun to part shade. Water once weekly until about the end of May then once monthly seems to be beneficial. That's about it. Using some slow release fertilizer seems to produce better results to an extent.

If you are further south and inland like much of Los Angeles here is what you do.

Plant in fall through the early spring and plant in the shade. Not in sunny areas and not in summer!

When you plant they need to be above ground a bit, like on a small mound that is a little (1/2") above grade. That is so the water does not drain into the center and rot the plant.

For new plants water weekly down to the roots until the beginning of May then monthly thereafter.

A bit of time release fertilizer like 14-14-14 in winter, sprinkled around the plant on the surface seems to help.

Apply mulch around the plant but not on top or touching the leaves - leaving some space, up to four inches. That will keep things cool in summer and allow some drying out again, reducing the chance of rotting.

That is really it on the growing side. Do your planting in the cooler months and in the shade. Water weekly for the new plants until pretty much the end of spring then down to monthly. There will be some losses - probably about 10%



Bob Sussman seedling



Iris douglasiana at Rancho Santa Ana Botanic Garden

The next issue to look at is that of supply. In actuality, supply and demand are probably about matched. The cost of producing Pacific Coast Irises may indeed be a little high relative to other types of competing plant material. So what?

There are always differences between the cost and resultant pricing of similar products from cars to shoes to food, etc. The somewhat higher cost of growing these irises has to do primarily with the length of the growing cycle. Growing from seed, it is at least a year from planting the seeds to saleable 1-gallon plants. Further, seedlings will always look a little different from the parent – sometimes a lot different.

If you want a selected hybrid, the production associated with specific hybrids is a little bit more complicated and raises pricing somewhat. From “cross” to flower to create a new hybrid is at least two years and can be three years. To increase the stock and produce a saleable quantity requires an addition three or more years. Over this five year period there can be losses. This is why selected hybrids can cost more than mixed or species seedlings.

The cost difference of selected hybrids compared to mixed seedlings is somewhere between 50% and 100%. This does not represent a big expense if you are a collector as many of us are.

The quantities are relatively small and the satisfaction high to have a piece of “living art”. The cost as a percentage of the total landscape is likely to be small too.

Now, to summarize all of this.

Pacific Coast Irises can add a lot of aesthetic appeal to the landscape. Planting out species or “mixed” Pacific Coast hybrids can provide a real natural look. Planting out fancy hybrids give it the appearance of a living art gallery. The growing part in your garden can be relatively easy. Too much love and tinkering can be deadly. After the first year basically ignore them - monthly watering works best. The more inland the garden, the more shade they need (I’m paraphrasing Kathleen Sayce and cannot improve on that).

If you accept my premise that Pacific Coast Irises are actually easy to grow and the perceived level of fear and risk drops, this is the same as a reduction in cost. A reduction in cost, even implied, results in greater demand and growers will grow more, both quantity and more selection – guaranteed.



The passing of a pioneer

One of the most influential of all scientists involved in the early work of Pacific Coast irises died late last year. Dr Lee Lenz' name will be well-known to readers of this journal, especially for his early work on the botanical classification of PCI, but also because breeding work with the Californian species *Iris munzii*.

The Rancho Santa Ana Botanic Garden published the following on their Facebook page in November:

Dr. Lee W. Lenz, Director Emeritus of the Garden, passed away on the 27th of October at the age of 104. We understand that he died peacefully at home as was his wish.

Lenz was born in Montana and received his graduate training at Washington University (St. Louis) in association with Missouri Botanical Garden. He came to RSABG immediately after finishing his degree and made his entire career here. He joined the staff in the late '40s before the move to Claremont (although he joined shortly after Susanna Bixby Bryant passed away and so did not meet her). He took over as executive director from Philip Munz in 1960 and remained in that post until he retired in 1984.

While working, Lee collaborated with other garden staff (including Percy Everett and John Dourley) to popularize native plants for gardens. For example, his 1956 book, *Native Plants for California Gardens*, was an early entry into the niche of native plant gardening. In his research, he was especially interested in *Yucca*; he travelled extensively in Mexico in particular in search of poorly known species. He was also fascinated by irises and in hybridization (including of irises and flannel bushes). In retirement, Lee continued working on some plant projects but also built upon and deepened his life-long interest in sculpture. He is responsible for almost all of the sculptures that grace the grounds of RSABG. This was nearly a solo project of his and his knowledge of sculpture and his keen aesthetic sense regarding the placement of pieces are in full evidence in our Garden.

In noting the passing of Dr. Lee W. Lenz, the Board of Trustees of Rancho Santa Ana Botanic Garden commended him for his "...long years of service to the Garden, for his vision in establishing the sculpture collection at RSABG, and for his generous gift of a number of works of sculpture to the Garden."



Dr Lee Lenz



One of the sculptures at Rancho Santa Ana Botanic Garden

Iris munzii: A partial view

Richard Richards

(originally in the Almanac, Fall 2001)

My contact with *I. munzii* began in the late 1960s when I first saw it growing at Coffee Camp, California, in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada Mountains. Following the directions given in Victor Cohen's *A Guide to Pacific Irises*, I was delighted by the beauty and the wide range of colors I found in that area. I have never seen such diversity of color and form in *I. munzii* elsewhere.



A visit to these stands became an important event every April for years. Subsequently, stands higher in the Sierra Nevada Mountains at Bear Creek were added to the itinerary. Correspondence with John Weiler had informed me of the location of these stands. Later through correspondence with a park ranger at Sequoia National Park, I saw the stands of Sierra Nevada Mountains *I. munzii* located within the park's boundaries, behind several locked gates where the public normally is not allowed. None of these other stands could match the Coffee Camp stands for variation and richness of color.

The Bear Creek stands of *I. munzii* grow at nearly 4,000 feet in elevation so they receive an occasional light dusting of snow in the winter.

This suggests that *I. munzii* may be a little more cold hardy than it is traditionally thought to be.

Dr Lee Lenz, director of the Rancho Santa Ana Botanic Garden in Claremont, California, had completed his study and classification of the Pacific Coast Irises in the 1950s, and saw the potential of *I. munzii* for adding size and color to PCI hybrids. In the late 1960s and into the 1970s, Lenz was growing various collected clones of *I. munzii* at the Botanic Gardens, in an area separated from the rest of the garden by a chain link fence.

I believe these clones were mostly collected at Coffee Camp, and I spent many spring days staring over the fence at these clones and the remarkable hybrids he produced from them.

One day Lenz invited anyone who was interested to come to the garden so he could share some of his irises with us. He dug pieces of his recent introduction, 'Sierra Sapphire', for everyone. He also commented, if my memory is correct, that 'Sierra Sapphire' was a collected clone, whose intense blue color had only shown up under cultivation at the Botanic Garden plot. It was indeed a magnificent shade of blue.

Even at Coffee Camp I had never seen that bright a shade of blue. Most flowers of *I. munzii* in the wild are a blue/grey color, with those at Coffee Camp showing variations into lavender, purple, and even violet.



Iris munzii growing at Coffee Camp
Photo: Richard Richards

Lenz began releasing hybrids involving ‘Sierra Sapphire’ and other *I. munzii* clones to the commercial trade. These introductions died with predictable ease for everyone who attempted to grow them.



‘Sierra Sapphire’
Photo: AIS Encyclopedia

The reason for their demise was evident. In the wild, *I. munzii* grows in areas of a fairly wet spring followed by a hot, dry summer. The irises go dormant in the summer as do most PCI plants in the wild, and summer water is the quickest way to kill them. In the RSABG plot Lenz attempted to replicate the conditions *I. munzii* was adapted to in its natural state, and therefore withheld summer water from June until mid-December, successfully growing them this way. The average gardener, however, rarely has the space and inclination to withhold water from a portion of his garden in the summer. Hence the catastrophic losses of Lenz’ hybrids in the average garden.

Lenz also grew the collected clones and hybrids in full sun though most clones at Coffee Camp and other places where I have observed them, grow in dappled shade. How that affected their ability to survive in Lenz’ garden is not clear to me. He may have lost all the collected clones and hybrids that could not tolerate full sun all summer, and the irises we saw at RSABG were the ones that survived.



‘Sierra Butterflies’ by Lewis Lawyer, 1983,
with *I. munzii* ancestry.

The morbidity of those introductions in ordinary gardens became legendary. I talked with Vern McCaskill of McCaskill’s Gardens in Arcadia, through whom Lenz introduced many of the *I. munzii* hybrids. Though McCaskill had grown and sold PCI hybrids for years, he could not keep the Lenz introductions alive.

Subsequently, Lenz introduced through Bob Hubley in Riverside, who, though he tried to emulate exactly Lenz' growing conditions, also had trouble keeping the irises alive.

Though quite striking, I believe few of these introductions exist today. Lenz gave away several of his promising seedlings at meetings of various iris societies, but these two are gone.

Lenz also gave several un-introduced seedlings to Thomas Abell, an architect who lives at Santa Monica, and for whose wife, Alma Abell, one of Lenz' most beautiful introductions was named. I saw those hybrids growing under citrus trees on the hillside above Abell's home and took slides of them. They seem to have been more easily grown. After Abell's death, Lewis and Adele Lawyer of Oakland acquired and subsequently used these hybrids as part of a successful breeding program.



'Sierra Dell', Lewis Lawyer, 1987, ancestry including Abell seedlings and 'Sierra Butterflies'.

Mitchell Medal winner 1995

In the meantime I talked with Dara Emery, the Horticulturist at the Santa Barbara Botanic Garden, who had a strong interest in native irises and was growing a number of species and hybrids there. He was interested in growing *I. munzii* in the garden. Armed with a collector's permit from the USDA, in the spring I marked a representative number of clones from Coffee Camp; I dug them for him the following winter. They persisted for a year or two in the SBBG and then disappeared.

Emery grew 'Sierra Sapphire' for a while, and was at first disappointed when it bloomed. I praised its wonderful blue color, and when I visited Emery, he took me to the garden and showed me a dull blue flower. It had the typical form of 'Sierra Sapphire'; but not the color. A week later I got a phone call from an excited Dara Emery. The later flowers were bright blue. Emery theorized that the blue pigment in 'Sierra Sapphire' and other blue irises derived from *I. munzii* breeding is heat sensitive, and the bright blue only shows up under fairly high temperatures. The early flowers had opened when cooler early spring temperatures did not allow the blue pigment to develop fully.

Emery used 'Sierra Sapphire' and other *I. munzii* clones in a breeding programme which involved crosses with his own most gardenable *I. douglasiana* hybrids, but I do not believe he introduced any of these hybrids, and his death put an end to that promising line of breeding. The Lawyers tried to acquire these seedlings, but I do not think they were successful.

In one of my later visits to Coffee Camp I noticed that road widening was being carried out by CalTrans (California Department of Transportation) several miles below the *I. munzii* stands. Fearing that the project would destroy many of the clones which grew close to the road, I collected the best blooms showing variety of form and quality of color, and took them to Joe Ghio in Santa Cruz, hoping he could use the pollen and preserve the genetic heritage of these irises.



'Sierra Azul', Joe Ghio 1997, with 'Sierra Dell' in its ancestry. Mitchell Medal 2005.

Though his PCI hybrids were just starting to bloom, he used the pollen as widely as he could, and his hybrids are another contribution of the preservation of the genetic heritage of the Coffee Camp *I. munzii*.

Ghio and other hybridisers in the Santa Cruz area are still advancing those lines, producing some magnificent blue, purple and violet irises, owing at least part of their heritage to the Coffee Camp *I. munzii*.

My wife Marty and I visited Coffee Camp after a ten to fifteen year hiatus, in the late 1980s or early 1990s, and were in for a shock. There were no irises visible from the road or from a short walking exploration of some of the areas near the road where I had photographed and collected *I. munzii* in the past. CalTrans had not widened the road in that area. The only explanation we would come up with is that people who had seen the attractive flowers, dug them on the spot, which is a death sentence in any language. Not knowing how sensitive they are to transplant, and attempting to transplant them at exactly the wrong time, these people had one by one wiped out on of the most wonderful stands of *I. munzii* I have ever seen.



Iris munzii at Bear Creek
Photo: Richard Richards

The Coffee Camp *I. munzii* were loved to death. I can only hope that somewhere in that area, over a hill or two which would discourage most exploration on the part of the public, perhaps in the barbed-wire confines of

someone's ranch, plants similar to the Coffee Camp *I. munzii* still bloom every spring. It is some consolation that the stands of *I. munzii* within the boundaries of Sequoia National Park are quite safe from the spades of flower fanciers who dig without knowledge of what they are doing.

The Bear Creek *I. munzii* higher in the mountains have suffered a partially similar fate, and any that could previously be seen from the road have gone. By going out in the field and over the edge of the hill, I found some plants growing and flowering unmolested, out of view of the road.

Though I have not seen them, I have heard reports of other stands of *I. munzii* still growing in the wild. SPCNI had a trek scheduled two years ago to visit some sites, but a lack of bloom led to a last minute cancellation of the trek. I hope that in the future we can find someone who lives reasonably close to the *I. munzii* native range to put together another trek. A clump of *I. munzii* in bloom in the wild, tall and stately, is a sight not soon forgotten.



Diversity of color among wild *Iris munzii*.
Photos: Wikimedia Commons

Putting the lens on Lenz irises



'Sierra Sapphire', introduced by Dr. Lee Lenz of the Rancho Santa Ana Botanical Gardens, is pure Munz's iris. It received the American Iris Society's Sidney B. Mitchell Medal in 1977 for the year's most outstanding Pacifica iris.

'Sierra Sapphire' was created by using pollen collected from an especially attractive plant at Coffee Camp in Tulare County to fertilize an *Iris munzii* flower already growing at the garden. Later experience suggested the intense blue color only appeared in flowers that bloomed during periods of hot weather. Under cooler conditions, the normal flower colors of wild *Iris munzii* predominate.

For more on this, see Richard Richard's article in the SPCNI Almanac, Fall 2001, reproduced inside this issue.

Putting the lens on Lenz irises



'Alma Abell'



'Claremont Big Sky'



'Claremont Bluebird'



'Claremont Indian'



'Grubstake'



'Ripple Rock'

All photographs from AIS Encyclopedia