

Corralitos Iris grower likes to spread the beauty around

By NONA PRETTYMAN
PIERCE

A poet of ancient times said, "If of thy mortal goods thou art bereft/ And of thy store two loaves are left/ Sell one, and with the dole/ Buy hyacinths to feed thy soul."

Ira Guthrie, well-known gardener of Corralitos would certainly substitute "iris" for hyacinths. He will be dividing his 350 varieties of bearded iris during the month of August and selling the rhizomes from his home on Hames Road beginning the first Saturday in September, the 5th this year, at 10 a.m.

The price is right — 50 cents for each "fan" (fan

of leaves with rhizome or root) or three for \$1. There will be about 1,700 rhizomes for sale. "A lot of my friends think I'm crazy" for selling so cheap, he says, and mentions that many of his plants are named varieties normally selling for \$7 or \$8 apiece. He believes in sharing, however, so that as many people as possible can grow and enjoy these beautiful flowers. He said nothing about irises feeding the soul, but beauty shared is never lost.

When asked why he grows iris instead of roses or some other flowers, Guthrie replied, "Iris are just as pretty as orchids, and are very easy to grow.

They take very little care." Ira, known by some as "Mr. GOMBA," is a board member of the Monterey Bay Iris Society, vice president of the UC-Santa Cruz Arboretum Associates, president pro tem of the Aptos Garden Club, and is administrative officer of GOMBA (Gardeners of the Monterey Bay Area) and editor of its newsletter. Anyone interested in gardening can receive the newsletter for \$2 a year.

The south one-quarter acre of his land is iris interplanted with black locust and redwood trees. The trees are treated as a crop, the locusts trained straight up against pipe supports. Locusts grow

fast, and Guthrie's 4-year-old trees are about 25 feet high. They'll be harvested when large enough, for fence posts, support posts and rails, etc. He planted the redwood trees because he likes them and feels that forests must be replaced wherever possible.

He connects gardeners' plantings of backyard trees with the massive destruction of forests going on in the Amazon Basin and other areas of the world. The removal of forests has a direct relation to erosion of soils and to changes in regional and even world climate, he thinks, citing the humidity that is produced by the respiration of trees and its part in the

cycle of rainfall. "Rainfall follows forests," he says.

The locusts are members of the pea family (legumes), as are the pole beans which are planted at the bases of the trees, twining up the trunks. At the end of the season the bean plants will be turned under, returning nitrogen to the soil, a vital part in another cycle of nature.

Guthrie is also growing a large planting of chrysanthemums as an experiment for a friend, and a plot of amaranth, the ancient grain of the Aztecs. Organic Garden and Farm magazine has asked gardeners in all parts of the United States to participate in a study of this grain as a substitute or replacement for other grain crops. Guthrie has been experimenting with different plantings for several years as part of this ongoing study.

The Guthries' move five years ago to the Hames Road property, where they found an apple orchard too old and uncared for to produce much, has changed the acreage into a lush Eden that could be mistaken for a thriving plant nursery. There is also a "conservatory" (greenhouse) against the house for house plants and a backyard greenhouse-potting work shed where Guthrie can be found when he is not planting, digging, harvesting or composting in the garden.

Plants and gardening are a continuing interest in his life. He graduated UC-Davis in plant science in 1932, taught high school for 15 years, including seven as a chemistry teacher, spent five years as managing editor of Science Teachers Journal ("good training"

for editing the GOMBA newsletter), worked for the federal Farm Security Agency in Watsonville (which is what brought him to this area), and did some farming in the Depression ("and didn't make it, like a lot of others").

Guthrie advises iris lovers that the proper time to divide plants is now. "Some do it in July. I do it in August." Iris should be planted in fairly rich, friable soil, with good drainage, a part of the rhizome showing above the soil. This is important, as bearded iris hates "wet feet." If you cannot plant the fan immediately after purchase, keep it in a dark place in a paper bag or box — not in a sealed plastic bag, as the accumulated moisture will cause the rhizome to rot.

Guthrie recommends the following for dividing and replanting iris (the instructions apply to bearded iris, not to other kinds):

1. Withhold water for two to three weeks before dividing to encourage dormancy.
2. Loosen the soil around the plant with a spading fork to lift the clump from the garden location.
3. Remove soil from the clump.
4. Separate the new rhizomes from the old-growth clump, saving the healthy roots, by breaking apart or cutting apart with a sharp knife.
5. Prune the roots and the green leaves to about 5 inches in length.
6. Clean any vestiges of old leaves from the rhizome.
7. Dust or dip the cut surfaces in a mixture of wood ashes (from fire-

place) and fungicide (Guthrie uses sulfur and benelate, also called benomyl) to prevent fungus disease that causes brown spots on foliage.

8. Plant the rhizomes in prepared soil just below the surface.

9. Water two or three times weekly until the iris are established.

10. Keep weeds and grass away from the rhizomes.

Then wait and let the iris grow until the next spring, when your labors will be rewarded in late May or

June with a symphony of color to delight the senses.

Guthrie harvested about two dozen new plants from two fans which were planted only two years ago. I went away with his gift of rhizomes of "Full Tide," a vibrant blue variety with both standards (upcurving petals) and falls of blue, and another variety named "Broken Chord," white with purple edges, which I hope will multiply profusely. When they do, they will be divided and shared, of course. Already a new cycle of iris is beginning.

Go easy with water

By ELAINE THOMPSON

Did you know that excessive use of water around the root area of an older, well-established oak tree means almost certain death to the tree? This is especially true if you are trying to keep a bluegrass lawn, ivy or periwinkle in good condition around the oak. There are attractive alternatives that tolerate light shade and some drought and have shallow roots, minimizing the amount of water that reaches the oak.

The daylily (*Hemerocallis*) is a surprising plant that will tolerate intense heat and is also a good performer in partial shade. Its tall, bright green foliage is a good backdrop for the yellow, red or orange flowers that bloom during the summer. It is tough and pest-free, besides being pleasantly decorative in the garden.

The dudleya species are a group of succulents that includes plants native to our coastal bluffs all the way south to Mexico. All of them do better in filtered sun than in hot sun. Use these rosette-forming succulents in masses under the oak tree. They are very drought-resistant.

For a woody groundcover try *Arctostaphylos edmundsii* "Carmel Sur," better known as Sur manzanita. This low-growing groundcover is tolerant of partial shade, and its dark green, fully foliated habit makes it an attractive plant in any site. Also, the compact Oregon grape, *Mahonia aquifolium compacta*, will give you a mass of bright green foliage from several inches high to clumps 18 inches tall. Its flowers are in two- to three-inch clusters from March through May, followed by black berries in the summer.

Native to California is the sword fern, *Polystichum munitum*. The evergreen, arching fronds of this fern are typically seen in the redwood forest. It adapts well to use under oak trees, where its leathery leaves form an excellent background for native iris (*Iris douglasiana* hybrids). The flowers of this iris can be white, cream, yellow, lavender, blue or reddish-purple.



Photo by Kurt Ellison

Ira Guthrie lifts and divides his irises about this time each year.

GOOD YEAR