

Touring Gabe Rivera's Iris Gardens

By Colin Campbell

On a pleasant, slightly overcast afternoon in late April, the irisarians in attendance at the 2024 Spring Regional found their carpools, buckled their seatbelts, and drove off to tour the first garden of the weekend. This first stop was the garden of Gabe Rivera, known as Gabe's Iris Gardens. As I stepped off the street onto Gabe's front walkway, a multitude of glorious blossoms caught my eye. On the left side of the walkway, he had planted a collection of bearded irises. The right side was bordered by a lovely garden filled with Louisiana irises, rose bushes, and a Japanese maple.



◀ Gabe Rivera front garden

Gabe Rivera started growing irises back in 2015 and soon was smitten by the iris virus. He started out growing primarily tall bearded irises; but after a number of years of losing bearded varieties due to weather conditions, Gabe decided to focus his collection towards Louisiana irises. He has found Louisiana irises to be much more adaptable than bearded ones in Charlotte, North Carolina's humid climate. He is also hybridizing both Louisiana and bearded irises. Gabe had some exciting seedlings getting ready to bloom, but they had not quite opened yet by the time of the tour. As I continued my walk around the garden, my attention was drawn to a large circular garden in the middle of the



Gabe Rivera Circular Garden

front lawn, surrounded by brick pavers and filled with Louisiana irises just bursting into bloom. I heard several judges comment that Gabe had curated one of the nicest collections of Louisiana irises that they had seen. In addition to growing many older favorites, he has a good selection of recently introduced hybrids. Both American and Australian Louisiana iris hybridizers are well represented in Gabe's garden. In the past, the only Louisiana irises that I had seen

in person had been in gardens where there were just a few varieties scattered here and there in areas of the garden that collected moisture well. It was very exciting for me to see this gorgeous garden where Louisiana irises were the prominent feature! I had only seen older varieties of Louisiana irises in the garden before – now I had the opportunity to see recent hybridizing advances in the Louisiana class. If I get the chance to visit Gabe's Iris Gardens again in the next couple of years, I might be able to vote for the Louisiana iris section of the AIS ballot for the first time in my years of judging.

The garden area in front of Gabe Rivera's house displayed roses in full bloom and more splendid cultivars of Louisiana irises. My eye was immediately drawn to the English shrub rose 'Abraham Darby' (D. Austin 1985). It was put-



Gabe Rivera Front LA Garden

ting on a beautiful show of color with its enchanting, pale pink blossoms. Making my way around the other side of the house I saw lush hostas amid the irises.



Gabe Rivera



Gabe Rivera LAs Growing in plastic Tubs

Touring Gabe Rivera's Iris Gardens (cont.)



Rose Abraham Darby in Rivera Garden

More roses festooned the wooden fence separating the gardens in the front yard from the nursery in the back yard.

The nursery fills most of the back yard and is an area where Gabe grows potted irises and varieties



that are not ready for a home in the front gardens. He has constructed raised tables for his potted irises with long wooden planks set atop cinder blocks. Gabe has also discovered a way to grow Louisianas in black plastic cement-mixing trays. He fills the plastic trays with planting mix, and they are ready for planting Louisiana irises in. Because Louisiana irises love moisture, he does not even have to drill any drainage holes. Several gardeners went home with plans to try their hand at cultivating Louisiana irises in these easy containers.

One of my favorite newer Louisiana iris hybrids that I saw was the frothy blue 'Vonda's Music' (P. O'Connor 2022), which sports white style arms and cheery yellow signals. It contrasted perfectly with the dark pink rose blossoms next



Vonda's Music
(P. O'Connor 2022)



Eyes Wide Open
(H. Pryor 2016)

to it. Another of my favorites was 'Eyes Wide Open' (H. Pryor 2016), a most unique blend of pinks with a pale edge around the standards and falls, and russet eye markings around the yellow signals. I enjoyed this one so much that I took four photos of it. Other newer varieties putting on a stunning display included 'Cream Galore' (D. R. Grieves



Cream Galore
(D. Grieves 2021)



Violet Vision
(R. Treadway 2019)



Moonlight Music
(P. Jackson 2019)



Pointe Aux Chenes
(J. Musacchia 2009),

2021), 'Violet Vision' (R. Treadway 2019), and the highly ruffled 'Moonlight Music' (P. Jackson 2019).

Some older Louisiana hybrids that caught my eye were 'Rich and Rare' (H. Pryor 2006), a ruffled concoction of pink and purple, the russet and gold 'Wizard of Aus-sie' (H. Pryor 1999/2000), and 'Pointe Aux Chenes' (J. Musacchia 2009), a bronze-colored variety with sleek blossoms perhaps hinting at influence of *I. fulva* in its ancestry?



Ocean Liner
(K. Keppel 2017)



Lavender Breeze
(T. Johnson 2019)

Bearded varieties of note included 'Ocean Liner' (K. Keppel 2017), and 'Lavender Breeze' (T. Johnson 2019), a lovely blend of lilac hues.

Gabe Rivera was a gracious host, taking time to answer all of our many questions as we explored his beautiful gardens. What a wonderful way to start off the garden tours for the Regional!