

# International Rock Gardener

ISSN 2053-7557







I doubt that many people will have reason to look back on this year with any pleasure – as the ‘Year of the Covid19 Pandemic’ there has been too much loss to engender fondness in most hearts. Family members and friends have been taken by the disease, disruptions of all kinds have ruined plans for events, travel and projects around the world in every sphere. Even in the year to come, it is unsure if the way of life for all, including plants lovers will be able to proceed in any form that we have come to regard as ‘usual’ – instead we must continue to find ways and means to discover some form of ‘new normal’ – not the happiest of prospects but there have been great strides made with international internet

meetings which could remain as we get to grips with new possibilities to make our existence bearable. I do believe that those with an interest in plants and the natural world have an advantage in having something so hopeful in these times. Our increased concentration and study of our plants over the recent lockdowns has meant many are understanding the needs of the flora and fauna around us as never before – there also seems to have been a positive explosion in the level of interest in gardening and self-sufficiency over the last few months. How fortunate those of us with our own gardens really are - what a pity it is has taken a pandemic to highlight that!

M.Y.

Cover photo: *Argylia adscendens* var. *adscendens* Christian von Bohlen

This month’s IRG presents an article by John and Anita Flores Watson on *Cistanthe celedoniana* (Montiaceae) which is a new species from Valparaiso Region, Chile, with notes on the genus, including a new combination, and photos of the flora leading up to the type area in the upper Río Aconcagua Valley. It is a pleasure to have Anita and John able to write again after their brush with Covid-19.

Our second submission this month is from [Panayoti Kelaidis](#), one of the most famous of American horticulturists, about Alan McMurtrie, christened by Panayoti as the King of Reticulates! Since 1980 Panayoti has represented [Denver Botanic Gardens](#) in multifarious endeavours as an expert in horticulture. His many other talents include [writing](#) and numerous awards, such as two of the highest honours in American horticulture. Praise from PK, as he affectionately known, is therefore praise indeed!



Panayoti Kelaidis in China



Alan McMurtrie is one of the world's foremost breeders of reticulata Irises. He has received awards for his work from the likes of British Iris Society and his hybrids [excite interest](#) wherever they are seen. Alan has travelled widely to give talks and seek commercial growers for his hybrids. Alan’s website is at <http://www.reticulatas.com>

Alan McMurtrie

Iris ‘Storm’



**HAPPY HOLIDAYS**

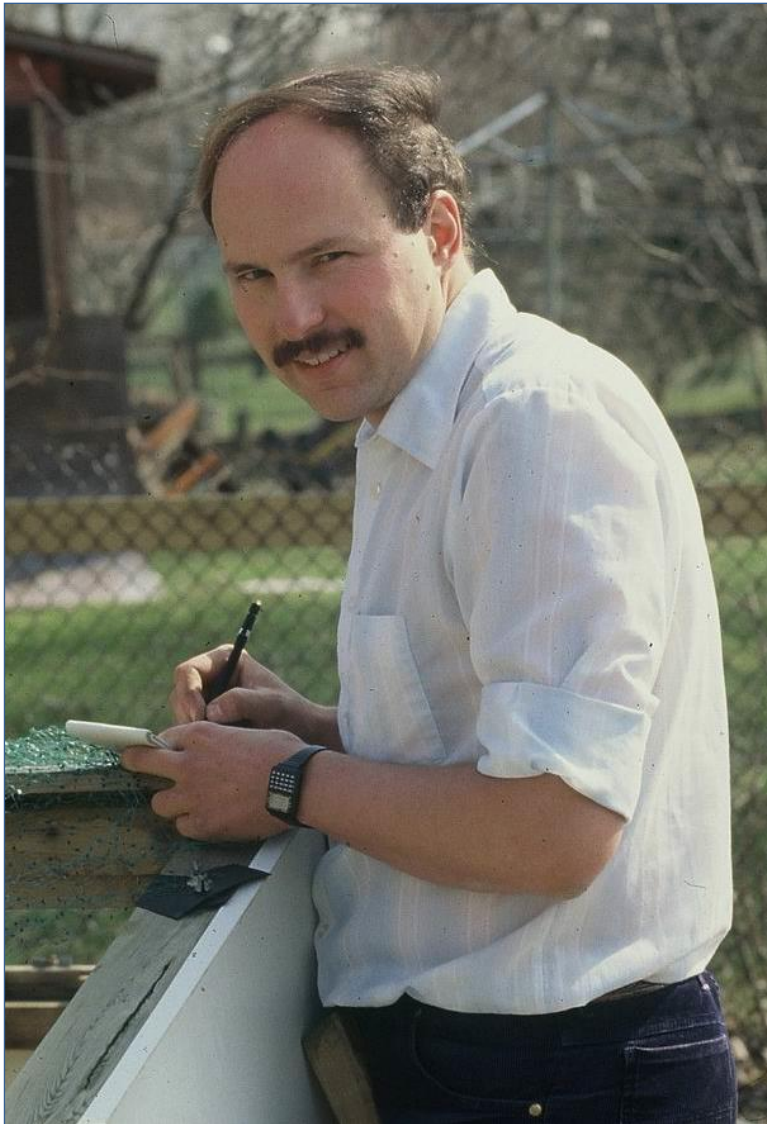
- and good health in 2021!

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## --- World of Iris ---

### The King of Reticulata By Panayoti Kelaidis

Sometimes we get lucky. In March of 1987 I flew to Toronto for the first time for a horticultural presentation at Edwards Gardens (now the [Toronto Botanical Garden](#)). Although my specialty has always been alpine plants and rock gardening, I have a strong interest in the genus *Iris*, and I have been a long time member of SIGNA ([Species iris Group of North America](#)) - one of the branches of the [American Iris Society](#). In their newsletters I had noted that Alan McMurtrie had been growing and writing about species iris. I contacted him before my trip thinking perhaps he might have a few *Iris* to see even early in the season during my visit. All this was conducted by mail and post offices back then: remember, this is before email and the internet invaded our lives!



Alan McMurtrie in 1987: photo P. Kelaidis

I rented a car while in Toronto and devoted a day to driving out to the suburb where Alan lived and fortunately it was a sunny day and sure enough, he had lots of irises blooming—many of them for the first time: he'd taken two collecting trips to Turkey the years prior to my visit, and I saw for the first time wild collected specimens of *Iris danfordiae* and *Iris histrioides* blooming—altogether different from the plants we grow under these names in our gardens. I had come to see species, but Alan's talk was all about his plans one day to hybridize plants in the Iridioctyon family of the genus (roughly a dozen species of plants we loosely refer to as "the reticulata section"). I listened to his rather grandiose descriptions of what he had in mind at the time and I only wish I'd had recorded what he said on a tape recorder. Although I thought what he was describing was rather far-fetched, I listened patiently. Little did I suspect the reality of what Alan went on to achieve in the years after my visit have far exceeded anything he might have imagined in 1987. It is all lovingly documented in amazing detail on his enormous and wonderful [website](http://reticulatas.com): [reticulatas.com](http://reticulatas.com).

Alan was employed at the time I visited him (and for many years thereafter) as an electrical engineer working for the Canadian Power company - a job with great responsibility requiring specialized skills. He was already married and had two sons who also occupied a great deal of his time and energy. I find it remarkable that in his spare time he was able to create from scratch the most ambitious hybridization program that I am aware of in the entire realm of hardy bulbs, crossing hundreds and ultimately producing thousands of seedlings, the best of which he has had the vision and business skills to market in the Netherlands where he has partnered with many Dutch growers to ultimately produce many of his best hybrids for the retail market.



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*Iris sopenensis* x *Iris danfordiae*, photo Alan McMurtrie

The year of my visit he began his first wide crosses between the fertile wild *Iris danfordiae* and *Iris sopenensis* that provided his first major breakthrough in his breeding. After that beginning, his program has literally sky-rocketed with breakthroughs and new colors.

Alan and I stayed in contact in subsequent years, and I followed his career with great interest. I was dazzled when he published pictures of his first wide crosses where the dramatic orange, bronze and multicolored iris flowers were like nothing I'd ever seen before. I simply had to get my hands on some of these bulbs.

Alan realized that the semi-arid steppe climate of Denver might especially suit his hybrids. Over the last decade Denver Botanic Gardens has purchased large quantities of McMurtrie irises directly from Holland to grow in our collections and also to sell at our large autumn plant and bulb sale (which this year sold nearly \$100,000 in bulbs and plants). The McMurtrie iris offerings have become a major magnet for plant connoisseurs at this sale, and hundreds of Denver area gardeners are now enjoying these in their private gardens.

I have been lucky to be able to obtain a large number of Alan's most recently marketed hybrids which I've grown in various parts of my home garden. The pictures accompanying this piece show how beautiful they can be in a rock garden setting. In Denver they grow well in any well drained soil -



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although I find they seem to like soils that have some loam rather than a sterile scree. They do need moisture in the springtime (when Denver often has frequent, heavy snowfall in late winter), I have had some of Alan's hybrids be snowed upon several times in a single spring: they are so sturdy they can go through two or three snows and keep on blooming!



*Iris x denticulata* 'Happiness' in the snow.



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Each of Alan's hybrids has its own personality - but I have to admit that when 'Mars Landing' first bloomed for me, I had a sort of shiver of amazement: it was even stranger and more wonderful than I'd imagined! But 'North Star' or 'Sea Breeze' have every bit as much panache. I want them all! In our sunny, steppe climate we can have bulbs blooming throughout the winter months: snowdrops for instance bloom from October and November (*Galanthus peshmenii* and *G. elwesii* var. *monostictus*) and by December and January the "spring" crocus are already emerging and starting to bloom. *Crocus*, *Cyclamen*, *Sternbergia* and *Colchicum* all bridge the fall to spring season—effectively shortening our otherwise long winter season. Although we do not yet have autumn blooming Iris, the Iridioctyon section are among the earliest bulbs to open in the new year -occasionally during a warm spell in January we have had *Iris danfordiae* open a flower, but by mid February there are many *reticulatas* starting to bloom in the warmest microclimates. Late February to mid March is usually the peak season (invariably interrupted by two or three snowstorms - although the snow usually melts quickly that time of year). There are usually a few *reticulata* section iris still blooming into the first week of April - giving them almost three months when there is little competition in the rock garden except for a few other "minor" bulbs.



Left:  
*Iris* 'Mars  
Landing'



Right:  
*Iris* 'Sea  
Breeze'



*Iris* 'Painted Lady'

Each year there seem to be a few more McMurtrie irises showing up in specialist bulb catalogues, and his older hybrids are starting to become "bread and butter" - which is to say standard plants even in the mass market bulb catalogues.

Ed.: Alan McMurtrie has been awarded the British Iris Society's Foster Memorial Plaque (2010) and their Hybridisers Award (2016) as well as the American Iris Society's Hybridiser Award (2019).



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*Iris* 'Happiness' – this time in full flower in sunshine.

They are comprising a more and more important element in my personal garden - they are the stars of the winter garden for me along with *Galanthus*, *Adonis* and *Helleborus*. But the McMurtrie iris have far more flamboyant colors and a huge range of variability. If you can succeed with the old Dutch selections like *Iris reticulata* 'Harmony' or 'J.S. Dijt' I know you will welcome Alan McMurtrie's remarkable new assemblage of rock garden gems.



*Iris* 'Sunshine'



*Iris reticulata* 'White Caucasus' and *Tulipa humilis*



*Iris 'Finola'*



*Iris 'Katharine's Gold'*





*Iris* 'North Star'



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*Iris x reticulata* 'Eyecatcher' and 'Blue Hill'



Above right: Alan speaking at the SRGC Early Bulb Event in 2016.



Left: A selection of his iris hybrids at an RHS London Show where Alan McMurtrie was able to chat with members of the public.