

CELEBRITY GARDENER

Toronto Iris breeder Alan McMurtrie hailed in Europe, E8

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Sonia Day
The Real Dirt

With spring still a long way off, here's something to cheer about. A Canadian from Toronto is currently getting star treatment in the Garden.

What's the Garden? Quite simply, the most prestigious gardening magazine in the English-speaking world. It's published by the Royal Horticultural Society in the U.K. and I've happily maintained a subscription for years. The only downside is that you rarely see any mention of Canada — or Canadians — in its hallowed pages.

So I'm personally thrilled for Alan McMurtrie, who's the subject of a prominent article in the February issue.

Why? McMurtrie is a retired electrical engineer turned plant breeder. He's one of those mildly eccentric folks who become obsessed with a certain type of plant and then spend years and years fiddling with the species, in the hopes of coming up with something better than the original.

In McMurtrie's case, the plant is stubby *Iris reticulata*, one of the first flowers to come up in spring. I have a clump in my garden and they're certainly a welcome sight, appearing so early. They also require no fussing (unlike taller, finicky, bearded iris.) Yet my blooms aren't particularly striking — a plain purple, with no special markings.

But now enter McMurtrie. He became fascinated by *Iris reticulata* during a trip to Turkey (where they grow wild on hillsides) back in 1985 and wondered if he could broaden the genetic base of the ones that were currently in cultivation. The thought got him so excited, he actually took early retirement from Ontario Hydro in order to spend hours and hours every spring tinkering with the pollen of different varieties in his North York backyard.

"After sitting in an office all day, it was nice to dabble out of doors, crossing different types to make interesting colours," he says. "And then one thing just led to another."

It sure did. Now, three decades on, this "dabbler" is being hailed in Europe for his colourful transformation of a hitherto unremark-



BLOEMBOLLENVISIE

Alan McMurtrie, a former Ontario Hydro engineer turned plant breeder, with one of his *Iris reticulata* hybrids. McMurtrie is featured in the Garden, one of the most prestigious gardening magazines. His *Iris reticulata* hybrid Spot On, below, is now available in Canada.



ALAN MCMURTRIE

able species. In the Garden article, new varieties of *Iris reticulata* that McMurtrie has developed are being called "dramatic" "gorgeous" and "absolutely superb." One, a delicious confection of purple and yellow with a stripe of brilliant orange, appears on the cover of the highly respected magazine.

There's so much buzz about McMurtrie, in fact, that this month he's exhibiting his new hybrids at professional horticultural shows in England, Scotland and the Netherlands — as well as touring all over the place to give talks.

However, he admits it hasn't exactly been a cakewalk.

"Persuading growers to start producing enough of my iris to sell to home gardeners has taken years," he says. "Lots of challenges. You need

to be a marketing expert to make it."

And now for the best news: McMurtrie's marvels are coming to Canada.

Botanus, a great mail-order outfit on the West Coast (try their bulbs) is stocking them. Not yet, though. These kinds of iris are planted in fall and thus can't be ordered right now.

"Our fall catalogue is due for release in early June and I can confirm that we're offering some of Alan's beautiful hybrids then," says Pam Dangelmaier of Botanus. "We just don't know which ones yet."

So check Botanus.com in late spring. And in the meantime, read more about our Toronto-born champ and his remarkable achievements at his website, reticulatas.com.

soniaday.com