

Irresistible irises

Toronto plant hybridizer Alan McMurtrie has created something truly magical for iris lovers: a stunning array of differently coloured *Iris reticulata*, one of the first bulbs to bloom in spring. And it's taken him only three decades.

Thanks to McMurtrie's perseverance, added to this iris palette that once included only shades of blue and purple are the new colours of green, brown and orange, as well as new combinations of white, yellow and wine red. ☺

Older spring irises, such as this *Iris reticulata* 'Harmony', remain popular, but newer hybrids offer even more dramatic colouring.

NEW IRISES TO TRY

CONTINUED



'Splish Splash', a new hybrid from Alan McMurtrie.



Top: 'Scent Sational', a fragrant-grape purple hybrid.
Bottom: Limited quantities of 'Orange Glow' are expected for next year.

Of the nearly 30 featured at this year's Royal Horticultural Society show in London, England, seven of McMurtrie's marvels are now available from mail-order nurseries in Canada, including Botanus in Langley, B.C., and Veseys in York, P.E.I.:

- 'Eye Catcher', snow white with navy markings and yellow ridges
- 'Scent Sational', a fragrant grape purple
- 'Sea Breeze', bright blue flowers with contrasting white tips
- 'Splish Splash', combination of blue, white and yellow
- 'Spot On', rich purple with dark purple-tipped white falls that are dotted with yellow
- 'Sunshine', bright yellow
- 'White Caucasus', white flowers with a bright yellow stripe

"Alan's hybrids are doing extremely well," says Wendy Leroux, customer care manager for Botanus. "People love them because they are so pretty and colourful, and the fact that they come from a Canadian hybrid-

izer is a huge bonus. They love that, too."

The route to success, however, hasn't been easy for the retired electrical engineer turned plant sleuth and breeder. "Thirty years ago, I went plant collecting in Turkey with a goal of finding a diploid form of yellow *Iris danfordiae* for use in hybridizing," McMurtrie explains. He found the *danfordiae* he wanted and set about crossing it with blue and purple *I. reticulata* and other species, spending hours every spring dabbling with the pollen of different varieties in his own garden. Creating a white flower in 1999, he realized he was making a breakthrough. "It has taken more than 15 years to multiply one bulb into more than 100,000," he says.

McMurtrie has worked with growers in Holland and promoters in England, as well as wholesalers and retailers at home and abroad, interested in carrying his hybrids, and now, happily, all his hard work is starting to pay off.

Why do these dwarf irises,

which grow just four to six inches (10 to 15 cm) tall on four-sided stems, fascinate McMurtrie? "They're one of the first flowers to appear each year," he says. "Here in Toronto, they bloom right as the snow is disappearing—perfect for helping to get rid of the winter blahs. Some years they seem to come up right through the snow."

His introductions have been a hit in England, Scotland and the Netherlands. *The Garden*, the prestigious RHS magazine, described them as dramatic, and "almost like something from a dark fairy tale." More of McMurtrie's new irises are expected to be available in Canada next year, including 'Orange Glow', with bright orange falls marked with dark brown, which will be in limited quantities.

McMurtrie is dedicated to producing varieties well suited to Canadian growing conditions. "In a sense, all I'm doing is giving Mother Nature a helping hand."
—Lorraine Hunter

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