

Iris Fields 'Shimmering Rainbow' Of Color

By BETTY FRANKEL
Special Writer

Can you imagine a garden with more than 500 varieties of iris in bloom?

It seems incredible, but that is what you'll find at Hughes Gardens on Lahser Rd. in Southfield where Francis Hughes grows and sells irises - and a great many other flowering perennial plants as well.

There are glistering white, pale creams, bright yellow, deep yellow, orange, bronze, mahogany red, pale silvery blue, light blue, deep sky blue, pink, orchid, purple, and some so dark they appear like black velvet. Some are solid colors, some two tones of the same color, and others are a combination of hues.

Hughes and other members of the Southern Michigan Iris and Hemerocallis Society will have their prize blooms on exhibit at Tel-Twelve Mall on Saturday and Sunday June 2 and 3.

This is not a competitive show, but is a display of many of the most beautiful new varieties. The show is open to the public during regular mall hours.

Although many of these colors existed in the wild irises which grow throughout the northern hemisphere, many more have been created by the hybridists. Irises are easy to hybridize, and they grow readily from seed. Also, the seedlings generally bloom the second year.

As Hughes points out, although it is simple to hybridize irises, it is hard to produce offspring that are superior to their parents. That takes skill in knowing what traits to develop, knowledge of the lineage of the parent plants, patience and a lot of luck, too.

Although there are numerous species and kinds of irises, those known as bearded irises are most popular. The "beard" referred to is a line of fuzzy hairs on the outer petals or falls.

There are dwarf bearded irises which bloom in late April and early May. Intermediate bearded irises 12 to 15 inches tall, bloom in mid-May. The tall bearded irises begin blooming in late May and continue into June. They range in height from 18 to 48 inches or even taller.

All of these grow from a rhizome or thickened rootstock. In addition, there are numerous kinds of beardless irises that grow from rather fibrous roots, and a few that grow from bulbs. The former include Siberian and Japanese irises and the latter include Spanish, English and Dutch irises.

Hughes, who is a member of the Southern Michigan Iris and Hemerocallis Society, has been an iris fancier for many years. Eventually his hobby became his career and about 20 years ago he began selling irises as well as growing them. At that time his gardens were on Greenfield Rd. across from Northland.

Thirteen years ago he moved to his present location in Lahser Rd. Hughes has all kinds of irises including more than 400 varieties of tall bearded irises. Each year he adds new kinds and eliminates some older varieties.

The irises in Hughes' garden represent the best of the irises that have been hybridized in the past 15 years. They are all award winners.

Each year new hybrids are appraised by the Iris Society judges. The best of these get "honorable mention." Plants of these are then sent to all parts of the country where they are grown and compared for two more years.

The third year after they are introduced, they are again judged, and the 12 that are considered the very best are given an "award of merit." The "award of merit" winners are all represented in Hughes' garden. There are also many of those high on the honorable mention list.

Incidentally, when these top award winners are first introduced they are very costly. A single rhizome, or root, sells for \$25 to \$30 or even more. There are many iris fanciers who are not content unless they have these latest introductions in their garden. Soon, though, as the supply increases, the price drops.

Within 10 or 15 years the same iris that had a price of \$25 may cost no more than a dollar or two.



ALL THE COLORS of the rainbow, except true red, are found in Francis Hughes' iris gardens on Lahser Road in Southfield. (Evert photo)

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