

WILD IRIS

By Shirley Froehlich, BSA

Close your eyes and dream a little. Imagine you are a Viking from the colony of L'Anse aux Meadows in Newfoundland, out hunting for your evening meal. Or you could be a *Coureur de Bois*, muscles straining, paddling your way through the wilderness to a fur trading post. Perhaps you are an aboriginal child waiting for your mother to dig up the roots of a special healing plant. Or imagine you are on a modern day canoe trip gliding through the early morning mist at the edge of a lake. In all of these scenarios, from ancient times to the present, the Wild Iris *Iris versicolor* was present. It greeted the Vikings and *Coureur de Bois* when they visited and travelled through the countryside. The roots were used by Native People as an emetic, a cathartic and a poultice. And it continues to provide a source of pleasure to contemporary canoeists and hikers when they come across this beautiful plant in the wilderness.

DESCRIPTION

Wild Iris grows 30-80 cm tall (12"-32"), arising from a thick creeping rhizome. It has erect, sword-shaped leaves 1-2 cm wide ($\frac{1}{2}$ "- $\frac{3}{4}$ "). The handsome foliage makes this a bold and attractive plant even when not in bloom. The violet/blue flowers bloom in June for about 3 weeks. The big showy flowers provide a large landing pad for visiting bees and the ample veins guide them inside to the nectar, which is produced in abundance. The bees unwittingly pollinate the flowers to produce generous quantities of large, dark brown seeds in 3-6 cm capsules (1"-2 $\frac{1}{2}$ ").

NATIVE HABITAT

Wild Iris, or Blue Flag as it is sometimes called, has a wide range, from Saskatchewan, where it is rare, to Manitoba through Ontario, Quebec and into the Maritimes. It extends south into the mid western U.S. and through to the U.S. east coast.

CULTURE

These plants prefer full sun, but will tolerate a little shade. Too much shade results in no flowers. They grow fine in a garden setting with medium to wet soil. It is important to have a good moisture supply until the plants finish blooming. After that it is quite all right if the soil dries out somewhat. This often occurs in the wild where ditches are wet in spring and dry out in summer. Wild Iris also thrives in shallow water on a ledge in a pond, providing a striking accent with its upright, dagger-like leaves.

Plants can be set out in the garden in spring or summer. They often don't bloom until the second spring. Wild Iris will self seed somewhat or you can start them from seed yourself with several methods. They can be seeded outdoors after collecting the seed in early to mid September. Simply cover them with about 1 cm of soil (.4") and most will germinate the following spring. I generally seed them in trays in early March, stratify in the coldroom for 6 weeks, then move the trays outside in late April for germination. They

germinate reliably every year with this method. They take a week or two longer than many other species to germinate. They are ready for potting up or transplanting to the garden by early July. If you wish to have plants ready earlier in the season it is a little more work. Put the seed in a nylon stocking or wrap in cheesecloth and soak the bundle in a bowl of water. The water should be drained and changed every day for at least two weeks. This soaking and rinsing treatment is to remove the seed germination inhibitor present in the seed coat. The seed can then be mixed with damp peat moss and stored in a bag in the fridge or a coldroom for about 3 months. Then seed the trays and put on heating cables at about 23 degrees C. They will germinate in 2 to 3 weeks.

Wild Iris can be used as a specimen plant in the garden or pond. It can be planted along lakeshores and creek edges, where the thick roots bind the soil and help to prevent erosion. It is also very attractive in groups in a flower bed or bog setting, where it can be grown with other like minded plants. In a medium to moist flower bed or prairie meadow it can be combined with Northern Bedstraw, Culver's Root, Joe Pye, New England Aster and Tufted Hairgrass. In a wetter bog it combines well with Northern Bog Violet, Saline Shooting Star, Swamp Milkweed and Marsh Marigold.

Planting Wild Iris in your garden can remind you of some of the history of our great country. It is useful in helping to prevent erosion along lakeshores and creeks, and it adds a little bit of wilderness beauty to your backyard or cottage too. So the next time you walk into your backyard, pretend you are a Viking hunter stalking a rabbit hiding in the Wild Iris.

Shirley is the owner of Prairie Originals, a nursery specialising in wildflowers and native prairie grasses near Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada. www.prairieoriginals.com