

EYE ON IRISES PART I



Iris iberica subsp. *elegantissima*



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Few plants come close to the glamour of irises. They are amongst the most seductively beautiful and appealing on all flowers. What is more they exhibit a tremendous variety of forms and colours and offer the temperate gardener something for just about anywhere. Having said that, perhaps the most flamboyant of all groups within this diverse (and at times) complex genus are the *Oncocyclus* irises. Their name sounds exotic, but alludes to the rather prosaic fact that their seeds possess a fleshy aril (extra seed covering). Typically, they have outsize flowers, often borne from very modest tufts of leaves and their favourite home is the steppes of central and eastern Turkey and Iran along with adjacent Mediterranean areas of Iraq, Syria and Jordan south to Israel. This features too many species to include here, so I'll stick with Turkey and Armenia (and Iran).

Many of years of searching for plants are sprinkled with vivid memories of first encounters and my first meeting with these fabulous plants was around Lake Van, where suddenly the fluttering white standards of *Iris iberica* subsp. *elegantissima* appeared amongst a stark volcanic landscape of basalt boulders and brooding hills; a seemingly impossible plant. To this day they still grow commonly in places, embellishing the landscape with unmissable flags that are designed to lure pollinating bees to the chocolate-veined falls. The lovely wine-red variant *I. i.* subsp. *lycotis* is a rare plant in Turkey (only in the far south-



Iris iberica subsp. *lycotis*



Iris paradoxa f. *choschab*



Iris paradoxa



Iris barnumiae



Iris barnumiae f. *urmiensis*

east) but can be seen more easily in neighbouring Armenia (relations between these two countries are improving and it may soon be possible to see a veritable feast of irises in one visit). I should mention the new Field Guide to the Plants of Armenia is now available, written by Tamar Galstyan and designed by your truly. Armenia is also where one can find the sumptuous purple standards of *Iris paradoxa*, a distinctive species with much-reduced falls. Across the border in Turkey this species is found as the forma *choschab*, which is white with blue-violet veins. Both variants are stunning. Variation in colour is commonplace with irises and the shift from violet to yellow seen quite often. *Iris barnumiae* appears in two forms; a typical the silky pink-violet coloration and yolk-centred sulphur; forma *urmiensis* (which can also be found in Iran). Finding both in flower at the same time was always tricky, since the yellow form usually flowered two weeks after the violet form.

Other species simply show a lot of variation in the colour, *Iris sari* being a prime example. This is by far the most widespread *Oncocyclus* in Turkey, its' range extending from north of Ankara and across the steppe to Lake Van. Even in one population there may be pinkish, reddish, coppery or near black variants and often forming sizeable clumps. Add to this their propensity for hybridising (with *I. paradoxa*) and there is







Iris acutiloba subsp. *lineolata*



Iris sprengeri

another confusing layer. *Iris sari* morphs into the equally variable and lovely *I. meda* in Iran (which like its' cousin hybridises, this time with *Iris iberica* subsp. *lycotis*).

Other examples of rather similar species include the fine-lined *Iris acutiloba* subsp. *lineolata*, a beauty from Iran and Armenia, which has a rose-suffused doppelganger in Turkish Cappadocia; *Iris sprengeri*. There is a big geographical gap two species, although once they must have rubbed shoulders. *I. maculata* is even scarcer and occurs in a few places near Mardin in southern Turkey, a region that also hosts populations of huge-flowered *Iris gatesii*. This extraordinary species is a sight to behold and the flower dimensions are perhaps matched only by some specimens of *I. kirdwoodiae* (from southern Turkey and Syria). My enduring memory of these is hiking the steep slopes of Halkis Dagi in an early season, passing so many spent flowers until we finally reached the top, where a few precious, pristine stands of these silken beauties were still flowering, each flower exquisitely and subtly veined and speckled, making every huff and puff worthwhile. Of all the Oncocyclus we've seen this one is always the most hard won - and satisfying at the same time.

Stay fit and see great plants.

Iris sari



Iris gatesii