

# ABS and Hybrids: The People and the Plants

By Sally Savelle, Concord, MA with editorial assistance from Gloria Utzig, Princeton, MA

**W**e all love begonia hybrids, with the great variety of forms, leaf textures, and flowers. But have you ever wondered about the hybrids named for people and been curious about the background story? For example, who hybridized the beautiful Rex *B. 'Wanda Macnair'* and if you have not had the pleasure of meeting her, just who is Wanda Macnair?

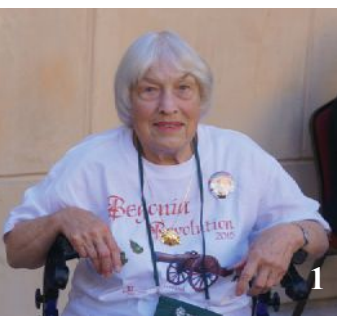
I have long been curious about these hybrids and recently did a program for Buxton called *ABS and Hybrids: The People and the Plants*. It turns out that many of the people for whom hybrids have been named, have made significant contributions to ABS. It is my pleasure to tell you some of what I learned when researching this program. I hope that you enjoy connecting the hybrid with the face and the life of the person for whom the begonia was named. My gratitude to the many ABS members in the U.S. and abroad who shared with me their time, photographs, and information about the people and the plants!

Since I consider Wanda Macnair to be my mentor, I will start with her. Wanda and her husband Dick have been members of ABS for over 45 years and received the Herbert Dyckman Award in 2001. Wanda is a Past-president of Buxton, National Director, Chair

of Buxton plant sales, and attends every national convention. She is known for growing and sharing terrarium begonias, so much so that a national show award for best contained atmosphere has been named for Wanda and Dick. In my conversations with other ABS members about Wanda's service to ABS, all described how friendly and outgoing Wanda is to new members. Charles Jaros said, "Wanda was the first person I met when I went to my first ABS function, which was the 1975 Eastern Region Convention that was held in Boston. Wanda was, of course, plant sales chair and I had brought some plants for the sale and was promptly put to work. Wanda made me and my mother feel so very welcome. It is something I will never forget." *B. 'Wanda Macnair'* was hybridized by Tim Anderson, Florida.

Brad Thompson is a prolific hybridizer and his hybrid, *B. 'Brad Thompson'*, is a beautiful eyelash rhizomatous begonia. In addition to hybridizing hundreds of begonias, his scholarly contributions include serving as editor of *The Begonian* and creating a website, Brad's Begonia World ([www.BradsBegoniaWorld.com](http://www.BradsBegoniaWorld.com)), a great resource for learning about different types of begonias, care and culture, growing for show, and more. A *Begonian*

article said this of Brad, "His handiwork was everywhere at the Convention! He worked the computer for the show registration, his artwork adorned the convention literature, his framed artwork went to show



winners, the boutique offered more of his works.” Wanda Macnair fondly remembered the time that Brad served as emcee at an ABS Convention dinner, doing a takeoff of the Academy Awards as he presented the ABS National Awards. Brad has received the Alfred D. Robinson Medal at least four times and also has received the Eva Kenworthy Gray and Ziesenhenné Awards. *B.* ‘Brad Thompson’ is rhizomatous; its parents are *B.* ‘Angel Glow’ and *B.* ‘Palomar Prince’.



Jan Brown and Mary Sakamoto are among many ABS past-presidents with hybrids named for them. Mary belongs to several ABS branches and for the past 11 years has been the treasurer for Orange County. She previously served as ABS 2<sup>nd</sup> vice-president, is a senior ABS judge, and for many years has served as the ABS Convention Advisor. *B.* ‘Mary Sakamoto’, a cane, is one of several begonias that Brad Thompson has hybridized and named for Mary. Others include one called ‘Bloody Mary’! Mary received the Marge Lee Award in 2009, an award given for contributing something of a spiritual value toward cementing goodwill and harmony among members.



Jan also belongs to several ABS branches, has been involved with many ABS conventions, currently manages the ABS Bookstore, and received the Dyckman Award in 2003. She enjoyed knowing Irene Nuss, and regarded Irene as her mentor. Jan says that she has always loved ABS, and her favorite begonias are thick-stemmed. Brad Thompson hybridized *B.* ‘Janet Brown’ a rhizomatous begonia; its parents are *B.* ‘Little Brother Montgomery’ and *B.* ‘Charles Jaros’.



Irene Nuss is described as one of the best hybridizers in ABS history and also as a great mentor and a role model to many. Irene once told Jan Brown, “If you belong to an organization, then you help!” Irene began hybridizing “just for the fun of it” and very much cared to make distinctions between her hybrids. Several ABS



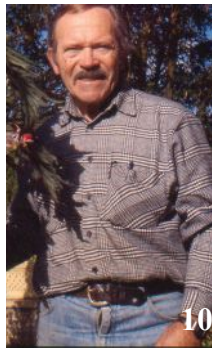
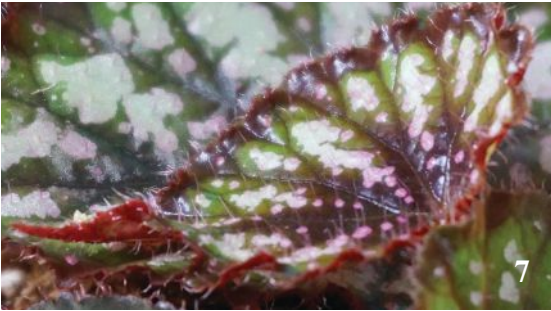
Wanda Macnair (Fig 1) and her namesake begonia, *B.* ‘Wanda Macnair’ (Fig 2), photos by Sally Savelle; Hybridizer Brad Thompson (Fig 3) photo by Chris Baker; see back cover for photo of *B.* ‘Brad Thompson’; Mary Sakamoto (left) and Jan Brown (right, Fig 5) photos by Sally Savelle; *B.* ‘Jan Brown’ (Fig 5) photo by Julie Vanderwilt; *B.* ‘Mary Sakamoto’ (Fig 6); photo by Gloria Utzig

members I talked to told stories about how Irene would throw away hybrids she thought were lacking distinction, so that no one else would retrieve them and grow them up! *B.* ‘Irene Nuss’ is a beautiful cane hybridized by Irene. Its parents are *B.* ‘Kentwood’ and *B.* ‘Lenore Olivier’.

Millie Thompson and her husband Ed wrote *Begonias: The Complete Reference Guide*, described by several ABS members as “the bible of begonias.” Millie, though described as quiet and shy, was recognized internationally as a begonia expert and scholar known for her meticulous research, and for making hard-to-find information available to botanists and horticulturists around the world. Millie and her husband received the Eva Kenworthy Gray and the Herbert P. Dyckman Awards and Millie was an ABS 2<sup>nd</sup> Vice-president. *B.* ‘Millie Thompson’ is a very beautiful rex hybridized by Gordon Lepisto; its parents are *B.* *versicolor* and *B.* ‘John Blais’.

Several hybrids are named for another ABS writer and scholar, Thelma O’Reilly, who recently turned 99-years old! Thelma is a recipient of at least three ABS awards: the Alfred D. Robinson Medal, Eva Kenworthy Gray Award, and the Herbert P. Dyckman Award. Thelma is described as “an unbelievable force” in the begonia world, being very knowledgeable about begonias and instrumental in the naming of several new begonia species. Thelma contributed to scholarly

writings with Jack Golding and Carrie Karegeannes, headed Members-at-Large, and contributed monthly articles to *The Begonian* in the 1970s and 1980s.



*B.* ‘Millie Thompson’ (Fig 7) photo by Sally Savelle; Thelma O’Reilly (Fig 8); Charles Jaros holding *B.* ‘Sir Charles Jaros’ (Fig 9); Hugh McLaughlan (Fig 10) and specimen of *B.* ‘Hugh McLaughlan’ (Fig 11); *B.* ‘Don Miller’ (Fig 12) Don Miller (Fig 13)

*B.* ‘Thelma O’Reilly’ and *B.* ‘Madame O’Reilly’ were hybridized by Brad Thompson and named for Thelma (as is *B. thelmae*, named by Dr. Lyman Smith of the Smithsonian Institute, in 1981).

Charles Jaros and his family have almost more hybrids named for them than can be kept track of. Charles has been an ABS member since 1972. He has served two terms as ABS President (the only person to do so), has attended all but three conventions, has twice been ABS Convention Chair, Co-chairs the ABS Judging Department, is an ABS Senior Judge, runs Entries & Classification for ABS Conventions and Southwest Region Get-Togethers, Co-chairs the ABS Unidentified Species Listing, and has received the Herbert P. Dyckman, Eva Kenworthy Gray, and Gene Salisbury Awards. Hybrids named for Charles include *B.* ‘Charles Jaros’ and *B.* ‘Sir Charles Jaros’. There are also hybrids named for each of Charles’ parents. *B.* ‘Chuck Jaros’ is named for his father. *B.* ‘Helene Jaros’, *B.* ‘Sister Jaros’, and *B.* ‘Lady Helene Jaros’ are named for Charles’ mother. Helene was also very involved with ABS, co-chaired the 1978 Eastern Region Convention, served as an ABS senior judge, and received the Eva Kenworthy Gray award. She joined ABS in 1972, was a member of three ABS branches in Florida, and was a charter member of the Palm Beaches Branch.

*B.* ‘Hugh McLaughlan’ is named for a very active and respected member of both the Scottish Begonia Society and ABS. Hugh was Vice-president of the Scottish Begonia Society for more than ten years, ultimately serving as President. He became involved with ABS when he and his wife, Betty, were visiting their daughter in America. She took them to a flower show in her area where they met a very young Charles Jaros and his parents. From then on until the year that Hugh passed away, he visited the U.S. often and was a banquet speaker at several ABS conventions. Hugh traveled throughout the world in pursuit of his begonia passion, including rainforests. *B.* ‘Hugh McLaughlan’ was hybridized by Antoon Hoefnagels. Before it was named, Antoon sent this plant to Samuel Kennedy, Scottish Begonia Society, and asked them to name the plant. They chose to name it for Hugh. Antoon feels that this colorful begonia was well named for a colorful begonia friend.

Most people know Don Miller for his active and important work with the Southwest Region and the Begonia Species Bank at the Ft. Worth Botanic Garden (FWBG), his hybridization of begonias, and work with Steve’s Leaves. He has written many scholarly articles for *The Begonian*. Don has made begonia-related travels across the world, including collecting begonias in the wild in Ecuador and Malaysia. Don says, “I am always looking for a new begonia or seeing how begonias grow in different environments.” Bobbie Price, another volunteer at the FWBG, remarks that Don is an active and “fantastic” volunteer at the FWBG, and that they would “sink” without Don Miller!

Maurice Amey is an ABS member who lived in Dallas and was very active in the Southwest Region. He is described by all as a worker bee and having a lively, fun personality. After being introduced to begonias by Don Miller, Maurice became “obsessed” with begonias (as are we all). Becoming editor for the *Southwest Region Leaflet*, he used his abilities as a professional graphic artist to turn the *Leaflet* into a professional publication. He received every service award in the Dallas Branch and the Southwest Region, served as chair and master of ceremonies of



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Southwest Region Get-Togethers, and eventually became an ABS judge.

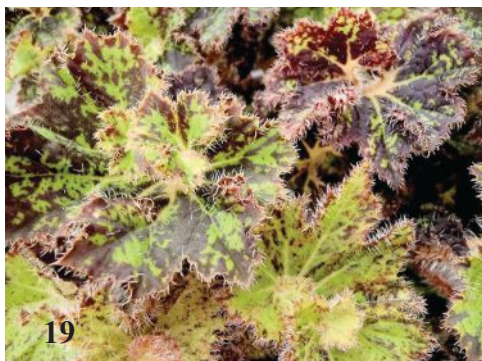
Interestingly, *B.* ‘Maurice Amey’ has the same lineage as does *B.* ‘Don Miller’. Don Miller provides the best description: “When visiting Begonia hybridizers, Stew (Naron) and Barbara Stewart, who live near San Antonio, the Stewarts were showing us some new seedlings from one of their crosses. This was a cross of *B.* U062 and *B.* ‘Torch’. There were two seedlings that were spectacular; one was bright silver pink with a thin edge of silver. This plant they wanted to name *B.* ‘Maurice Amey’ and the second seedling was covered with tiny silver spots, sometimes so many spots that it looked almost solid silver. This silver seedling was to be named *B.* ‘Don Miller’. This was such an honor to have to magnificent new cultivars named after us.”

*B.* ‘Bobbie Price’ was hybridized and named by none other than Bobbie Price, hybridizer and volunteer extraordinaire at the FWBG; in fact Bobbie just celebrated 20 years of volunteering at the FWBG. Bobbie lives in Ft. Worth, belongs to several ABS branches, and has been a member of ABS since the early 1980s. When asked what her favorite begonias are, Bobbie replied, “I love every one of them.” In May, 2016, the Southwest Region recognized Bobbie as “Ambassador for the Begonia,” as “there isn’t any place she goes that she doesn’t say, ‘Have you seen our begonia collection?’”

*B.* ‘Bobbie Price’ is a beautiful cane with pink flowers whose parents are *B.* ‘Benigo’ and *B.* ‘Nancy Cummings’.

Joan Coulat lives in Sacramento and joined ABS in 1974, saying that she went to one branch meeting and “I was hooked.” The Sacramento branch of ABS is named for Joan. She has four begonias named for her: *B.* ‘Joan Coulat’ hybridized by Rudy Ziesenhenne, *B.* ‘Curly Coulat’ and *B.* ‘Joan’s Fantasy’ hybridized by Paul Tsamtsis, and *B.* ‘Madame Coulat’ hybrid-

ized by Brad Thompson. In Sacramento Joan is known as the “Begonia Lady.” Joan tells a recent humorous story where just before having minor surgery, the anesthesiologist came in the room and said, “Aren’t you the Begonia Lady?” He then proceeded to pepper Joan with questions about his failing begonia, stopping by to visit Joan post-surgery. Joan’s six-year old granddaughter loves begonias, recently asking Joan for a *B. polilloensis*,



*B.* ‘Maurice Amey’ (Fig 14); Maurice Amey, displaying a *B.* ‘Maurice Amey’, joined by Barbara and Naron Stewart (Fig15); *B.* ‘Bobbie Price’ (Fig 16), photo by Butch McDole; Bobbie Price (Fig 17), photo by Sally Savelle; Joan Coulat (Fig 18); *B.* ‘Morris Mueller’ (Fig 19), photo by Paul Tsamtsis; Rudolf (Rudy) Ziesenhenne with Eva Gray Kenworthy (Fig 20)



even pronouncing it correctly; perhaps a future begoniac in the making? Joan has served as ABS national show chair and co-chaired the San Francisco ABS Convention.

Morris Mueller was an ABS member from Sacramento who traveled internationally to collect begonias. He wrote many articles for *The Begonian*. His service to ABS included a term as ABS President and being a strong participant in the ABS Save-Our-Species program. In addition to his interest in begonias and involvement with ABS, he was a strong supporter of animal humane organizations and a beloved math teacher. When Morris passed away, he very generously left a portion of his estate to ABS specifically to support scholarship, collecting of begonia species, and for financial support of begonia research expeditions. Morris received the Eva Kenworthy Gray Award. *B.* ‘Morris Mueller’ is a beautiful rhizomatous begonia with bright green leaves.

Rudolf (Rudy) Ziesenhenne lived in Santa Barbara, and was affectionately known as “Mr. Begonia.” He was a prolific hybridizer and talented grower. He researched and wrote extensively about begonias and was very involved in nomenclature for ABS. He was instrumental in issuing *A Suggested Guide to Classification of Begonias for Show Purposes*, which systematized the judging process and allowed all ABS branches to judge in the same way such that an award given by one branch had the same meaning as an award given by another. He wrote many articles for *The Begonian* and served as keynote banquet speaker seven times at ABS Convention banquets. Rudy hybridized many well-known begonias and named them for his sons, Fred (*B.* ‘Freddie’ and ‘Red Fred’) and Rudolf (*B.* ‘Skeezer’). The Santa Barbara Branch is named for Rudy. The Rudolf Ziesenhenne Award was established in Rudy’s name in 1998 for exceptional editorial contributions in the field of begonia studies; he was the first recipient. Rudy also received the Alfred D. Robinson, Eva Kenworthy Gray, and Herbert P. Dyckman Awards.