

## THE PLANT COLUMN

### Martin Stimson



## Waving the flag for Winter Bloomers, which lift the human spirit

*Martin Stimson was Head of Horticulture at Writtle College for 17 years and before that he managed the educational plant collection at the college. He continues his series of personal reflections on plants that have special meaning for him. In a highly personalised account of his encounters with the Algerian Iris he notes its surprising delicate beauty in the darkest months of the year*

*Abandonment and neglect run against the very purpose of gardening, but to reward your spirit and increase the number of winter blooms Iris unguicularis needs to be largely ignored.*

Its November, its 5.30 in the evening and the night is young and dark. There's an orange cast across the sky from nearby street lights and murky shadows litter the street. Its disgustingly wet and noticeably cold. In fact its potentially a very miserable evening. Nothing on the telly, a hard day at work is over and the prospect is the same for tomorrow. Its easy to think of the long dark winter ahead and forget the joys of winter horticulture.

As I turn the car sharp right off the road and onto a short parking place in the front of my house the headlights sweep across the front wall of my living room and garden. I unexpectedly catch a sight of some light patches nestling in a cluster of unremarkably normal grassy leaves tucked up tight to my house wall.

That's it. That's what I've been waiting for to lift my winter spirit and cast aside the soporific gloom of November. My front garden is not a horticultural paradise but a simple formal affair, facing east with a small lawn and a Sorbus tree which a close friend gave me. It's now dropping its berries before the starlings get them, but beyond that the plant collection is urban and utilitarian. The exception in this urban blandness is Iris unguiculairs or the Algerian Iris. Its a tough nut which ideally seems to thrive on neglect (this is an essential criteria for inclusion in my front garden as I don't like gardening in a social and public window). Paradoxically it is this neglect which results in the production of one of the most delightful blooms in the horticultural world, delightful not only in colour and design but also remarkable because of the time of year the blooms are produced.

We normally associate Iris in our minds, with big blousy blooms in May and June, or elegant wands in the summer herbaceous border. Iris germanica types provide the fanfare parade that says summer is on the way. But none of this is true for Iris unguicularis, much preferring to make its subtle contribution to the winter.

The phrase “my spirits were lifted” applies to the experience that followed my journey home as I got out of my car that November evening, and went to explore this winter flowering charmer. The light spots I'd seen in the headlights were in fact the first blooms of the season. A temporary horticultural high that is welcome in the rain, darkness and winter gloom which for a few minutes were then forgotten. A short almost ritualised inspection of the plants whilst getting dripping wet was well worth the effort. I resisted the temptation to pick a bloom which I've done in the past and quickly went in doors to the warmth and the dry, cheered up by nature's continual ability to surprise and amaze.

First experiences tends to be memorable in all walks of life and sometimes this is true for horticultural introductions. Annual arrivals also of flowers fruit and seed still enthuse me and excite me like a small child getting the Christmas present they always wanted.



Sometimes the first meeting with a particular plant traps a vivid memory that stays for ever. The first time for example that I saw Liquidambar styraciflua screeching its vibrant red hues across the landscape one misty autumn morning my jaw dropped. I was but a young gardener who had never seen such intense colour in leaves before. When I then crushed the leaves and smelt them I trapped the memory of that time which now returns every autumn. The time, the place, the people I was with, the scent and the smell of the garden are all revisited in most cases with an inner smile and good feelings.

*Liquidambar styraciflua*

*Acer griseum*

This first encounter moment is one I've had the pleasure of seeing now in lots of other people over many years, as I've shared with them my limited knowledge and experience as we've wandered purposefully around gardens and landscapes.

The first time I touched carefully and felt the bark of Acer griseum I took a sharp breath and stared, or the first time I smelt Chimonanthus praecox the Winter Sweet I closed my eyes and savoured the moment. All these events are milestones for me on the journey of horticultural of life.





Winter time I guess though is always a little more emphatic because there's floristically less to see and to grab your attention, unless you go looking for the unusual. To some folks, dead leaves of ferns and grasses are just that, and they need clearing up and composting. To others the dying foliage becomes the place where frost accumulates and spiders spin their webs which gather dew and catch the early morning sunshine. Thus death can also become an attractive feature in the winter garden landscape.

*Frosted flowers and mist*

My first encounter with *Iris unguicularis* was when I was about 18 and it was one of one of disbelief. In childhood I worked in a garden alongside my grandfather who was a Head Gardener. I watched, listened and learned from my hero as he tapped clay flower pots to see if they were dry, he earthed up celery to get long stems, and he disbudded chrysanthemums and trained standard fuchsias. All skills I came to appreciate in my horticultural career. He wasn't what I would call a plantsman, more a practical problem solving craftsman, who led armies of gardeners growing food and plants for the 'House'. Flowering arranging also had to be in his skill set, in the sense that, relevant blooms had to be harvested and incorporated into the rooms of the house where he was employed. So he gathered knowledge of plant associations over many years of experience. Winter arrangements would have included *Iris unguicularis* but he never let on and I never met with the plant till he had passed away and I was beginning adulthood. Now I see *Iris unguicularis* on table mats and on Christmas cards surrounded by other winter blooms and twigs, most notably winter Jasmine and Viburnum.

With *Iris unguicularis* I was horticulturally shocked to discover that I'd never met this flower before. How come that I'd been gardening all this time and never heard of, let alone see this wonderful flower? This is a common feeling because the natural world and the horticultural world is so vast. One works in a small sphere of gardening activity which one colonises and feels that one owns and knows. In reality of course one is sampling a tiny fragment of a world which one never gets to know fully

*Iris unguicularis* came a surprise because I'd walked past the tuft of grassy leaves for the weeks from September to November and to be honest not really taken any notice of them at all. They are thin, mid green, lax, a bit scruffy with dead grassy leaves mixed in. I now know that gardeners often plant this *Iris* at the base of a wall, unusually a dry wall and the plant seems to thrive. It bulks up at ground level in an unobvious iris-like way so tightly packed with leaves and stems that it's bone dry. Imagine then walking past the next day and spotting an exquisite pale blue *Iris* in late November or early December. My reaction of disbelief seemed associated with the concept that in the plant world it couldn't be possible that such a delicate thin petaled *Iris* which is porcelain blue could sit in the cold Essex air above this tuft of leaves unless it was made of silk or plastic.

It's a flower that for the enthusiast cries out to be touched and caressed in the palm of the hand to protect it and to savour it. The first flower is literally a landmark for winter. Its delicacy also screams 'look at me closer and take me inside'. Closer inspection reveals wonderful markings on the throat, something you can study when its on your table more easily than bent double on a November's night in the wet.

I'm not one for over doing the superlatives, something that annoys me intensely about TV gardeners who will not let the pictures do the talking. Not every plant is "wonderful" or "superb" or "fantastic". Each to their own, but there is something special about this *Iris*, both in the beauty of its blooms, and the timeliness of its flowers.

When I moved to my present house *Iris unguicularis* was one of the first plants I obtained some divisions from. I now have a tuft of leaves on my own house wall facing east which is 30 years old. There's virtually no soil or moisture for the plant but the leaves now make a giant clump which is difficult to work without gloves and fork.



The first flowers always catch my eye, make me smile and I make a note that winter is here. In an optimistic sort of way means that spring will shortly follow. I then have to take precautions to prevent the snails (left) eating the flowers. If I talked to plants, (which I don't think I do, other than in my head) then I would ask it what it was playing at. Its cold and the wind is biting, but the bloom stands tall and proud

In the spring I like to tidy the plant if I remember. Some early famous authors refer to cutting the leaves back to enable the rhizomes to get baked in the summer sun. But another great feature of this *Iris* is that it can thrive on neglect

and abandonment. When tidying there can be bin liners full of dead leaves and usually hordes of snails who seek winter dryness and protection in among the leaves. I occasionally take a small side shoot from the parent plant and see if I can get them colonised elsewhere. This can take time so be patient.

Drought and poor soil don't seem to get in the way of flowering with the Algerian iris. Mediterranean in origin, dry shallow soils seems to suffice for this tough plant. In fact it will make leaves not flowers if its too well looked after.



*Iris unguicularis*

The daily commute means leaving the house in darkness and returning under sodium lights. Thus seeing my favourite Iris in daylight only occurs at weekends. Bringing a bloom into the house enables me to marvel at the form, texture and colour of the bloom and wonder how this plucky flower stands our winter climate. For me special plants need to get brought into the house. So I find it difficult to resist plucking a bloom or to stand one in a solitary vase on the table. Like Snowdrops, Iris flowers should be pulled slowly upwards and not cut. I've also read recently that if they are pulled in bud, one can watch them unfurl in water rather like Evening Primroses in summer dusk.



This is definitely something I'm going to try when the evening TV turns me into a grumpy old man and lets me down again.