

IRIS AUSTIN

NEWSLETTER OF THE IRIS SOCIETY OF AUSTIN
An affiliated Society of the American Iris Society in Region 17



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neldamoore6947@att.net

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NO JULY AND AUGUST MEETINGS

2011 CONVENTION BY KEN FUCHS

Oh, Canada! What a magnificent setting you provided for the 2011 A.I.S. National Convention! The British Columbia Iris Society, one of several A.I.S.-affiliated societies in Canada and part of Region 13 (along with Washington, Oregon and Alaska, and Yukon) hosted the Convention in Victoria. The B.C.I.S. is only five years old, and under the leadership of Ted Baker, they put on a very exciting and memorable convention.

Victoria is located on the southeastern tip of Vancouver Island and is the capital of British Columbia. This vibrant city has Old World charm and yet seems very American. Only differences in currency (at a convenient 1:1 rate with the U.S. dollar) and a few vowels in the local inhabitants' speech made visitors realize we really weren't in the U.S. The Convention Headquarters were at the Fairmont Empress Hotel, a splendid structure built in the Chateau style between 1904 and 1908, on Government Street. It faces the harbor, and the Parliament building is located in easy walking distance one block away. Tourism has become the primary industry in Victoria. A vast assortment of shops, restaurants, and pubs are located in the adjoining blocks near the Empress, so taxis and buses were unnecessary for dining and shopping in our free time. It was an exciting time to be in Victoria and in Canada in general. The Vancouver Canucks were playing against the Boston Bruins for the Stanley Cup. There was Canucks-Madness everywhere, especially after they won the first game while we were there. The atmosphere was equivalent to Super Bowl excitement here in the U.S.

The Victoria Convention had almost the exact number of attendees as did our 2008 Convention in Austin, around 390. Three members of the Iris Society of Austin attended: Carolyn Wylie, Jim Landers, and Ken Fuchs. Another familiar face was there, too, Beth Alley, who attended with a friend from Austin. Finding the meeting rooms for the Convention was somewhat awkward at first. Jim and I arrived on Sunday, May 29. The banners for the BC Iris Society and the American Iris Society were hanging from the railings along the Upper Level in the Lobby, which is a newer wing of the hotel, but there were no signs indicating where to go. It was a matter of exploring the hotel, but it was worth it. We had to go upstairs and then follow a passageway which led to the original part of the building. It was like a time tunnel, and soon we were surrounded by the elegance of 1908. Eventually we found a staircase that took us downstairs again, and the registration table and various section tables were located in the hallway there.

One disappointment for many representatives from the various sections and societies was the Boutique. Because of import and licensing restrictions, none of the American attendees were allowed to sell any items. Therefore, there was no Silent Auction and no A.I.S. Store Front. Only Canadian artists and craftsmen were selling their creations in the Boutique. To be sure, it was a beautiful art gallery in itself, but there was too much competition for the individual artists to really make much headway. Also, there was no Geek Dinner.

One very special treat for all attendees took place Tuesday afternoon. All of us rode buses to Butchart Gardens, about thirty minutes away from the hotel. Along the way we had an opportunity to see more of Victoria and the outlying countryside. One shrub particularly dominated the scenery along the roadways

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— Scottish broom. This brilliantly yellow flowering plant grows wild everywhere along the highways. This extremely invasive plant was brought to North America by Scottish immigrants who missed their homeland. Like mesquite trees in Texas, it keeps spreading and is considered a nuisance by many Canadians. We saw it in Oregon during the 2006 convention, also.

Victoria and British Columbia experienced an unusually long winter, and as a result, the local iris bloom season was delayed, and we saw only a very limited number of irises blooming in the gardens. But there were so many other flowers and flowering trees and shrubs in bloom that our eyes were overwhelmed with myriads of colors. Our first real visual feast was Butchart Gardens. Originally a stone quarry that eventually was exhausted of limestone, the elaborate gardens came about when Mrs. Butchart, the owner's widow, began converting it into a sunken garden which opened to the public in 1921. Enormous tulips of every imaginable color grace the walkway into the gardens, and gigantic rhododendron and azalea bushes form backdrops that inspire artists and photographers from all over. We often had to patiently await our turn to take pictures while groups of Japanese and Chinese tourists were busy taking theirs. Besides the sunken garden, at the far end of which is a large lagoon with a dancing waters display, we also visited a lovely Japanese garden. Most breathtaking in it, near a Zen garden, stood large clumps of delicate blue poppies. Butchart Gardens are a worthy destination for anyone who loves beauty and color.

Tuesday evening the Welcome Banquet was held in the Crystal Ballroom in the original part of the Empress Hotel. Most of us enjoyed salmon with fresh asparagus for our main course. Afterwards, the entire group of attendees moved to the Victoria Convention Centre, a large new hall directly behind the hotel. The guest speaker was the Honorable Iona V. Campagnolo, the previous lieutenant-governor of British Columbia. (The office of lieutenant-governor is equivalent to that of governor in the United States.) She was extremely dignified and spoke softly, but it was obvious that she was a figure of authority and very well respected. She is also a member of the BC Iris Society, and as a gift, she was presented with a recently hybridized, potted Pacific Coast Native iris called 'Banner for Iona' as well as a lovely painting of the iris.

There were four guest gardens on the tours. Two of them were at university gardens. Finnerty Gardens are operated by the University of Victoria and boast more than 4,000 different trees and shrubs, including 1,500 rhododendron and azalea plants. The guest garden was in the back, and beneath a red-leaved tree stood a clump of 'Banner for Iona' in full bloom. Nearby stood a shrub with orange-striped blossoms. One woman told me it was hybridized Scottish broom.

The 2011 Master Planting was at the Gardens at Hatley Park, operated by Royal Roads University. This national historic site stuns the eyes when you first approach it. Atop a high rise stands a large castle-like house built in the Edwardian manner in 1910. During the Battle of Britain in 1940, when there was a possibility that the German armed forces would invade England, plans were made for King George VI and Queen Elizabeth and their family to move to the safety of Canada and the Hatley House.

Fortunately, they never had to move. Beside the house is a very extensive wooded park area which contains a Japanese garden, a rose garden, and several other formal gardens. Beyond the rose garden lay the guest iris garden, and while the blooms were limited, there were many fine specimens for everyone to enjoy.

On Wednesday and Thursday our buses stopped for lunch at Stake Centre, a large church and youth center. We were treated to choices of barbecued chicken, salmon, or a vegetarian meat substitute. The salads and desserts were really delicious. Following Mormon custom, no coffee, tea, or pop (we say soda) was allowed, but there was plenty of juice. →

