

Public Relations Committee Report fall 2009

Preface

I am writing my remarks as I face a personal crises. I have a dog with pneumonia that may not survive the night. I brought her into my vet a day ago and he could find nothing wrong. That night she was acting worse and I took her to an expensive emergency clinic. They diagnosed pneumonia. Suspecting this I had downloaded a protocol from the Irish wolfhound society. They recommended a special antibiotic, which we had ordered ahead since we wanted to be prepared for this if it happened.. I explained the protocol to the vet. He would not listen and insisted on the anti-biotics he had in stock. the next day, today, he relented, since his prescription was not working. As of this writing I do not know whether the dog will survive until morning. Right now I see a parallel between my vet and the Iris society. The time scale is different but I am not sure that it is too late to change to save the society.

When I joined the board as a new director I had been in the Iris Society for almost 25 years and had accomplished many projects that I believe added value to the AIS working within the sections. Through the years I had heard many negative comments about AIS. But despite the fact that AIS had flaws, I never felt the need to address them because they did not threaten to keep me from accomplishing what I saw as valuable. Nonetheless when I was invited to be a board member I thought it would be an opportunity to make improvements that could satisfy much of the discontent that I had heard of over those 25 years. I saw that the condition of the society did threaten to keep me from my goals since I projected that AIS would not make it to its one-hundredth birthday.

Public Relations seemed an ideal position to try to change this fate. What else is there to PR, other than listening and trying to fulfill the needs of those with whom we need to interact? Now that I am coming to the end of my terms, I feel like I have failed. I have been much too slow and much that should be done is still unaccomplished and will not be finished under my watch. I still have hope that we will reinvigorate our society to regain its place as viable, respected and valued institution and ensure its survival. At present our image does not fit that dream. I believe that those who say it does, do so denying the evidence that is all about us. We have initiated many goals that could improve things, but few have actually gone into place. In a last attempt I am proposing twenty one motions set off in **red type**. I will try to present these in an outline of the task before us.

Our Mission, not impossible

One could define our society as a network exchanging Iris information. Promoting Iris implies an outreach to those outside who have not joined our network along with communication within the network.

Information is available everywhere today. Some might suggest that we have become redundant, when all is available for free. But if we have a robust network, the information we have to offer, will exceed in quality and quantity that which is freely available. Surely the knowledge of our members exceeds that of the public when it comes to Iris. We have competed successfully in the past in the information marketplace. But the marketplace has changed and our products now seem dated. The marketplace will continue to change. But as a non-profit organization of 4000 members our collective Iris

knowledge still exceeds any other competitor. Our network itself is reason for joining. We should be able inspire our network to create the best product out there with state of the art technology. Without aspirations there is no reason to exist.

Creating our public Image (A comprehensive plan)

If we wish to be a viable productive part of the gardening community and not just become a small insular group of elites, we need to interact with all components of the gardening community. I will break them into the following parts;

- Horticulturalists and Botanists
- Garden Media
- Other Plant related Institutions
- Average gardeners & Advanced gardeners (Although this is the key group we do not have the credibility and gravitas to excite it, if we can not draw from the elite groups above)

The Gardening Community. Science and Horticultural

The AIS statement of purpose mentions “shall be to cooperate with other organizations, public and private, in the scientific and horticultural education”

In the years in which AIS was growing it had strong connections with Science (Randolph-genetics) and Horticulture (Ackerman-USDA). There were active investigations into the nature of Iris, their culture and selection (Cornell Plantations Iris Test Gardens). Today where is the outreach to Botanical Gardens and Universities?

National Collections/Archives

One bright spot in our relationship with botanical gardens could be occurring with the development of National preservation collections of Iris. Currently I have tacit approval from both the AIS and the APGA, developing a relationship with the American Public Gardens Associations office of National Collections. I am currently involved in creating a national collection of rain lilies for a local botanic garden and once I prove that I can complete all the paperwork and help the garden satisfy all the requirements, I will have a tract record with the APGA. I expect that then, I can act as an agent in not only helping our membership create coherent collections, but also advise botanical gardens on creation of their own national Iris collections. I see this as a partnership between the APGA and the AIS that needs to endure for a long time. Because of this I would like to make the motions

that AIS create the AIS Office of Iris National Collections, Display and Test Gardens.

The APGA asks of its botanical gardens to make such a public commitment authorized by their boards before they approve a particular garden’s request to hold a national collection. If we are to build national collections among our members and at public gardens I feel we need to make a similar commitment. I would hope to invite interested irisarians to help in this regard and I can train them in the requirements of these gardens.

An example of a putative National Iris Collection under the agency of the AIS is the Sass Memorial Garden in Nebraska. Currently they have a great historic display and are planning to add to it. There is a great amount of historic Sass memorabilia which is also being held in the area

but with some reluctance to turn it over to the AIS library for fear it will go into our “vault” and never be seen. With this in mind I would like to make the motion that:

AIS authorize traveling exhibits on loan from the AIS library. These may be transient or housed semi-permanently in appropriate locations. The contents of these displays will be part of the AIS library, with a yearly inventory reported back to AIS or the contents returned.

Registration

I would like to make the motion that:

We negotiate with the Royal Dutch Bulb Growers to allow us to include the Bulbous Iris registrations in our checklists.

Discussion: Currently descriptive information on cultivars of bulbous Irises is available in the current SIGNA checklist (a fact that is probably unknown to most all of the directors of the AIS board. I also doubt that they have current copies) The Dutch have been very cordial in allowing this information to be published from their checklists and I am convinced they have the best interests of plants-people at heart in their actions. I believe it would not be impossible to work out a sensible cooperative arrangement. Often only one or two bulbous Irises are registered with them in a year. Their registration process involves trialing a cultivar and only registering it if it is distinct and better than what is already available. Their primary interest is in maintaining the legal bulb growers rights similar to our patent and trademark protection.

THE MOST IMPORTANT SERVICE OF THE AMERICAN IRIS SOCIETY IS ITS FUNCTION OF INTERNATIONAL REGISTRAR FOR THE GENUS IRIS. If we do not pay attention to what is happening in the gardening world our greatest asset and our most important reason for being could be eroded away because of our ignorance and self absorption. There are new bureaucratic threats to plant registration. I spoke with the head of a major plant introducer/wholesaler to the US market about registration and his attitude was why bother when a patent provides better description and designation of the plant and protects his legal interests. If we do not work on providing a more robust and comprehensive presence in describing all Iris, we may face a diminution to the point of redundancy. If present trends continue and we don't interact as a player on the world stage even registration may become irrelevant.

One third of the Bulbous Iris market is still with producers in the USA. The market in bulbous Iris greatly exceeds the market in all other Iris including tall bearded. We could profit from the bulbous Iris market if we did not choose to ignore it. Bulbs are an essential part of most gardener's gardens even those specializing in Iris. Our current attitude of ignoring Bulbous Iris is unwise and partitions off a major portion of the Genus which according to our bylaws and covenants we are supposed to represent. It also diminishes our strength in the overall gardening community.

When the Iris Society was founded we registered bulbous Iris. We did so until the 1940s or 50s. Then the Royal Dutch Bulb Growers took on all bulbs, and we passed the Iris bulbs over to them. But this is not how it worked. The Dutch thought of rhizomes as bulbs. So the de facto situation was that the Dutch registered Iris of all types that were produced in Holland, bulbous or not. Their concern even to this day is restricting and regulating the market of mass produced bulbs that their growers offer to the world. Since years ago, Van Tubergen and other Dutch growers were interested in Aril Iris, many of these were registered with them and not the AIS. Even today Japanese and other Irises are emanating from Europe without registration through the AIS. But because the Dutch control major wholesale markets, Iris unregistered with AIS are becoming common in Garden Centers and major catalogs in the USA. As the AIS becomes less significant more and more unregistered Iris have been coming on the market.

Consider the fact that, we already often fall back on the bulbous Irises for arrangements in a show. And consider that Bulbous Iris require the same degree of effort in culture that a tall-bearded requires, if not more, I consider the current restriction of them not being eligible for Best in Show a cop-out. I know the history of how that rule came to be, and consider it was a too easy fix to a disagreement between two avid exhibitors who were also prominent hybridizers. A difficult political decision ensued. But such bad decisions based on blatant politics could eventually kill our society, if they aren't already. (Not that I have any opinion). I would like to make the following motion;

That if we can include bulbous Iris in our checklists that they then be allowed to win best of show.

Other organizations:

As mandated under our statement of purpose I have been communicating with other plant organizations. I have discussed exchanging ads with other plant societies. There is some interest by the Daylily Society and The International Bulb Society but note each has a different page size than the AIS bulletin and different size memberships. The only equitable way seems for each society to advertize simultaneously but gear the size of the ad to similar ad costs. A full page ad in our bulletin for the daylily society may only mean an ad a third of a page in their journal.

I would like to make the motion that we exchange ads based on roughly equivalent ad prices.

I have suggested to the Daylily Society that there might be some advantage to different plant societies having joint symposia. The possibility of several groups creating a hybridizers symposia where geneticists and plant developers might talk about the science involved in plant breeding. It seems to me that there might be many issues that could be of interest to several specialty plant societies and that we might all benefit by setting up a system of communication between groups.

Facebook I will not have all the information needed in time for this written report. But I have been investigating the use of Facebook for the American Iris Society. Preliminary investigations indicate it could be especially useful in announcing events and may have special relevance for our affiliates. I have said before that we need a twenty year old PR person. In that regard I would like to make the motion that

we offer a cash prize to the best idea presented to AIS by a young member (under 21) of how to promote the Iris society to their generation.

Wiki. The wiki is progressing and as of this writing and I believe we may have something to show at the board meeting. There needs to be a discussion of whether to start it off under a members only site before it is moved to general view and secondly a clear understanding of its possible impact on the Iris Register.

Internal PR

No-one wants to join an organization or work for one that does not fulfill its stated duties and services. It is essential that we function better as an organization.

I would like to make the motion that:

Starting in January 2010 we have quarterly board meetings on line to occur in each quarter that we do not have a face to face meeting;

(Discussion) The world is moving too fast to have the luxury of only one meeting a year in which there is any real business is transacted. Meetings-To-Go can provide a multi-phone and computer connection to the board for \$49 a year. Proposals by AIS discuss has not worked well since we can only discuss one issue at a time, and they often take over a month to resolve. It may be possible to reduce our meeting time at face to face meetings by dispensing with much of the business that could be handled otherwise. Time in person might be better spent brainstorming. An agenda presented before an online meeting might allow for only an hour or two of conference call discussion to accomplish what weeks of internet discourse achieves.

I would like to make the motion that:

Starting immediately the second vice president have the position of Overseer of Disaster Management and they may appoint individuals as they see fit to monitor backups and needed redundancies to ensure the continuation of service within offices of the AIS due to failures in systems electronic or human.

Affiliates do not feel a part of AIS. Their criticism is in part undeserved but AIS does not communicate well enough with the affiliates to dispel these notions. I would exhort the board to seek consul and communicate directly with the affiliates. One example might be the following: Directors are nominated to the board by the nominating committee. Most members do not realize that nominations to the board can be made directly by an individual from the floor. I would like to make the motion that:

we direct each year the nominating committee to send a letter to each affiliate asking for suggestions from their members of those they would like to see on the board.

The nominating committee still retains the ability to reduce the number of nominations to a manageable number but the input from affiliates could make their job easier. I would like to hear other ideas as to how we could improve the communication of the affiliates with the board. If affiliates have a disagreement with their RVP who can they go to, to get a fair hearing? The real power of the AIS lies in its affiliates, yet most do not feel apart of AIS. How can we improve on this?

National Climates

While some few plants can grow moderately across our country certain cultivars surpass these in performance in particular environments. Our present Iris symposium recommends iris to the novice yet these recommendations may not be the best for their biological region. I would like to make the motion

that in addition to our traditional national symposia, we report symposia results in a climatic region format. That 6 to 10 climatic regions to be designated later so that we have credible recommendations to the gardening community appropriate to their climate. Each announcement of results should also stress that local affiliates can provide the best data for your locale and then provide a link to help the public find their closest affiliate.

The following is a suggested list of biological regions based on data currently available to us. In the future we might wish to change to sorting by USDA zones, but that we would require adding that data point to each ballet:

Suggested Bio Regions:

Northeast: (R1) Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, Massachusetts, Connecticut, Rhode Island; (R-2) New York; (R-3) Pennsylvania, Delaware: (R16) Canada.

South: (R4) Maryland, District of Columbia, Virginia, West Virginia, North Carolina: (R5) South Carolina, Georgia, Florida & Puerto Rico: (R10) Louisiana; (R24) Alabama & Mississippi; (R19) New Jersey: (R24) Alabama & Mississippi:

Midwest: (R6) Ohio, Indiana & Michigan: (R7) Tennessee & Kentucky; (R8) Minnesota & Wisconsin; (R9) Illinois;

Rockies: (R11) Idaho, Montana & Wyoming: (R12) Utah: (R20) Colorado

Great Plains: (R17) Texas: (R18) Kansas & Missouri: (R21) Iowa, Nebraska, South Dakota & North Dakota: (R22) Arkansas & Oklahoma:

Southwest: (R15) Southern California: & Arizona: (R23) New Mexico:

Pacific Northwest: (R13) Washington, Oregon & Alaska: (R14) Northern California, Nevada and Hawaii:

Membership Loss

So far we have done very little to address membership loss in the four and one half years I have been on the board. Some small efforts have had some small temporary effects but have not been continued. When we gave away excess Iris from the Portland Convention we were able to get members to change to 3 year memberships. Although successful this effort was not large enough in scope to change the overall downward trend. Now we are eating into our reserves because the membership has fallen so far and the only avenue we have open is to gain members or drop an issue of the bulletin. In this regard I would like to make the following motions:

Motion:

That we retain 4 issues/year of the bulletin drawing from reserves as necessary this coming year (2010) and will change to 3 issues/year in (2011) if we do not bring in either \$20,000 in promotional fundraising challenges or increase our membership by 1,000 (5000 total) or in combination achieve an increase of 500 members with a \$10,000 fundraising success during 2010.

This motion assumes that we will do some dramatic promotions to both raise money and increase membership. I offer the following promotions.

Proposal for E-Sale

I move that we offer five Iris and 2 year membership for \$50 on the internet.

Discussion The ad should explain that these are specially selected new improved Iris especially vigorous in your part of country and with them you get a two year membership in The AIS. I believe hybridizers are sick of us trying to get free Iris from them so I would suggest we fill orders from irises donated by the local affiliate. We should explain in the ad that it is a limited offer and depends on availability of these newer less common iris.

Motion that we utilize Van Bourgandien or another wholesaler/retailer like Brent and Beckys Bubs for fundraising bulb sales;

Discussion: Van Bougandien already has in place a program in which organizations can raise money selling fall bulbs. I believe they would work with on selections available to our members. The beauty is that Van Bourgandien does all the work and we only have to collect the orders. Since we are selling bulbous Iris and or daffodils there is no competition we our Iris nurseries.

Maintaining and creating Members

I move that AIS organize a seed exchange of hybrid crosses.

SIGNA is successful with its seed exchange emphasizing species. It is also a big reason why people join SIGNA. In the past when people offered seed of various hand-pollinated crosses the seed sold readily despite these being species fanatics. It could develop into a reason for people joining AIS and also involve members besides earning a bit of money.

Motion that we set prices in storefront with a members and non members price. Members should receive a 30% discount.

This is not so much to make money but to provide one more reason for being a member.
Motion That

we offer a list of Timber Press plant books especially those related to Iris through the storefront advertized on the internet at whatever discount we can negotiate.

In the past other plant organizations have done this and they can sometimes work a deal that they buy no inventory and the books are really shipped out from Timber. This creates another reason for belonging. Members and non members prices can be advertized on items on our website.

Motion

that we have a color ad selling The World of Iris on our website \$29 for non members \$14.99 for members.

Once you have a new member a great part of the task is retaining them. Over half of first time members do not renew. The Daylily Society has found that going to an 8 1/2 by 11 format has helped them retain members. The new glossy magazine style format is more appealing and desirable than their old journal style format like that of AIS. In addition advertising in the new format has increased by \$12,000 in the first six months. To help us retain members

I move we change our bulletin to 8 1/2 by 11 format.

The product needs to be accompanied by a black and white yearbook containing lists of officers, chairman, judges, sections, exhibition reports, and other information pertaining to the business of our society.

I move we create a separate Yearbook.

In conclusion: If we are to continue as a society we must adapt to a new world a great part of which has now become electronic. We need to have a virtual counterpart now not sometime in the future. Redesigning a website using the same material that is there now is an incomplete answer. Any new website needs to reflect a new virtual reality we create.

I move we have a members only website immediately and that with feedback from our members we begin filling it with material that they provide. In conjunction I would also create a content committee that will begin providing content that is part open to the public and part behind the members only website and that at least a portion will be available by this coming summer.

Mike Unser can tell you how this was done with the HIPS website and ever since. they have been an actively growing section

I also move we create virtual memberships to be enacted no later than this next summer.

an E-world:

Since I have already suggested much I am just going to make some quick thoughts about e-memberships. Will we have e-affiliates? e-regions? What will an e-welcome packet look like? Will e-members be contacted within minutes of the time in which they join. Can we link them to a real person, their e-mentor. Can we involve them in e-meetings? Blogs, Facebook, other e-links. Will the sections have e-memberships? How can we keep the virtual society in tune with the "real" society? Can we have e-seminars? workshops? judges training? For a society that has no time for club meetings or conventions and would like to spend more time in their gardens an e-reality may be the answer to why people are not joining the traditional society. But to be successful the e-society needs to offer a rich experience not just an after thought or the result of our desperation.

I will report at the meeting whether my dog Lucy survived. I hope she will despite the we can't change mentalirt. I also hope Ais will have several more good years, but the

downward spiral I predicted 3 years ago is beginning and it is getting harder and harder to reverse.