

SPACEAGER IRIS

Horns, Spoons and Flounces on the beards of Iris

At the 2017 NSW Iris Society Show, an iris with horned beards, THORNBIRD, won its class and Champion Second Day Exhibit, attracting much interest from visitors to the Show. Introduced in 1988 by American hybridiser Monty Byers, Thornbird won a swathe of American Iris Society Awards at the time of its introduction, including their Dykes medal in 1997.....but what is the history of these so-called Spaceagers?

Spaceagers stem back to a visit by Lloyd Austin to the garden of Professor Sydney B. Mitchell in May 1944 in Berkeley, California. Amongst the tall bearded seedlings, he found a flower which he described as having "a slight projection at the end of the beard". While Mitchell, the breeder, was quick to dismiss this as a "fault", Austin saw potential, and went on to breed hundreds of iris with appendages on their beards from this original seedling.

Austin "selfed it and crossed it with eight of (Mitchell's) other *plicata* seedlings". In their 1946 bloom, only one of the selfed seedlings showed "the beginnings of horns". This plant was crossed with another seedling from Mitchell, and by the early 1950s, Austin was producing blooms with horns varying in length from a few mm up to 37mm.

In his 1957 catalogue, Austin describes his first introduction, UNICORN, as follows:

"This is the original, the world's first horned iris. Represents greatest break in development of an entirely new and highly decorative iris form that has occurred in the last half century of intensive Iris breeding. Customary beards, instead of reposing quietly on the falls in the normal position, are raised and separated from the falls, projecting as striking plumed horns."

Austin died in 1963, but the "Space Age" had commenced!



Above, UNICORN, (US Iris Society Blog)

As Jean Richter points out in her blog for the American Iris Society, in 1989, Monty Byers "introduced Thornbird, a very polarizing iris - people either loved or hated its interesting colour. No one could deny its vigour and excellent garden qualities, however, and in 1997 it became the first space age iris to win the Dykes Medal."

Left: the horned THORNBIRD (Pic B Levy)

Byers had set the standard, again winning the US Dykes Medal in 1998 with the horned CONJURATION and yet again in 2002 with MESEMERIZER, showing extravagant flounces.



CONJURATION (pic J Taylor, at Kinspirit Iris Farm) MESMERIZER (pic courtesy of wiki.irises.org)

In Australia, Lesley Blyth has introduced a few Spaceagers with flounces:



BE MY GIRL (pic courtesy of hort.net)



MIST ARISING (pic courtesy of wiki.irises.org)

With regard to the showing of Spaceagers, UK guru Sidney Linegar notes that *"Horns, spoons and flounces require special attention"*.

"Often on a bloom there are two (appendages) of the same size and one smaller one. The more open flowers on a spike the more unbalanced it can become and when judging at shows it is the most balanced spike that wins. Flounces upset balance more than horns."

The spooned SNOW SPOON (pic wiki.irises.org)



Article compiled by Michael Barnes. With thanks to several of the Iris Society of America's blogs, but the primary source is Lloyd Austin's own 1961 article "Controlled Evolution of the Horned, Spooned and Flounced Iris".

