

THE NATIVE IRIDACEAE

Penny Hussey



Above and right: Western Iris, *Patersonia occidentalis*.

Western Australia has so many introduced members of the Iris family, and they are so peskily obvious, that we tend to forget that we do have some native species too!

The family Iridaceae is worldwide, with about 82 genera and 1,700 species, having a major centre of diversity in southern Africa, and other concentrations in South America and the eastern Mediterranean. In Australia we have five native genera with about 26 species, outweighed by 24 naturalised genera with 54+ species. WA has 47 introduced species and 19 native ones, the natives in two genera.

The family contains mostly perennial herbs growing from a corm or rhizome. The flower parts are in threes and can form the very striking 'fleur-de-lys' shape, such as seen in the garden German or Dutch irises, or somewhat orchid-like, as in gladioli. But many others form a simple circular design.

The exact origin of the 'fleur-de-lys', the unofficial heraldic emblem of France, is lost in the mists of time but is generally thought to be based on



the shape of an iris, the Yellow Flag, *Iris pseudacorus*, found throughout northern Europe except for Iceland and Spitzbergen (not a 'lily' as many people suppose). The shape represents an iris flower seen from the side, with two drooping sepals and one upright petal between them. This striking plant is commonly found along the edges of rivers and freshwater wetlands.



Iris pseudacorus

Orthrosanthos, the Morning Iris, has four species in WA, and three in America. The name comes from the Greek and means 'morning flowering', hence the common name.

Our species all look fairly similar, they are tufted perennials, growing from a rhizome, decked in spring with spikes of gorgeous sky-blue flowers. *O. laxus* is the most common, growing throughout the south-west; *O. muelleri* grows in and around the Stirling Range; *O. multiflorus* on the south coast from the Stirling Range to Israelite Bay, and also in SA and Victoria. It grows up to 60cm tall, but *O. polystachyus*, which grows between Busselton and the Warren River in damp shady gullies, is the tallest of all, and flowering stems can reach a height of 1m.



Morning Iris, *Orthrosanthos laxus*.

Patersonia is a genus of mostly tufted perennial herbs, with three broad flower segments, usually purple but sometimes white or yellow. The name commemorates William Paterson (1755-1810) who, when Lieutenant Governor in NSW, sent specimens to his botanist friend Robert Brown at Kew Gardens in England. In WA there are 14 species, all found in the south west.

The most common and widespread species is *P. occidentalis*, the Purple

Flag or Western Iris. This is a tufted plant with large purple flowers found throughout the south west from Northampton to Esperance. *P. pygmaea*, only a few centimetres high, is the smallest. It forms small tufts on laterite in the south west and has showy purple flowers. There are several other species that differ in the amount of hairiness or leaf shape. *P. babianooides* is rather unusual in that it dies back to a corm-like structure in summer, pushing up its solitary leaf in winter. The leaf is hairy and pleated, and looks very like the nasty weed *Babiana*, hence the specific name. (I once caused consternation among other members of the Wildflower Society on a bushcare day when I started to pull it out!) It is found on laterite in the higher rainfall parts of the Darling Range.



Patersonia babianooides.

The only yellow-flowered member of the genus is the lovely *P. xanthina*, Yellow Flag. This forms part of the understorey of forest in the higher rainfall south west. On a sunny spring day the 5cm-wide flowers are like splatters of gold starring the often gloomy jarrah forest floor.



Yellow Flag, *Patersonia xanthina*

Flowers of both genera only last a day, but the inflorescences do produce lots of them. If, however, flowers seem to be very rare on your healthy plants in bushland, suspect a nectar thief! Early in the morning, grey kangaroos will carefully pull off the flowers, one by one, and eat them, relishing the sweet nectar which has

accumulated in the long floral tube.

Plants from these genera make good garden plants as border edging or in shady spots. They will flower in the second year from seed, and clumps can be divided and transplanted. Once established they are long-lived, and are well worth the initial effort to establish them.

WATCH OUT FOR CLEAVERS

The Bridgetown-Greenbushes Biosecurity Group Inc. (BGBG) has raised concerns about a recent explosion of cleavers species (*Galium aparine* and *G. spurium* - it is difficult to differentiate the species) within its Shire. LFW members Jenny Dewing and Eric Wheatley have been actively spraying dense, rapidly spreading patches of the weeds for several years, both along the Blackwood River and higher up in bushland, but fear they are fighting a losing battle.

Control is difficult because seeds germinate more than once a year and are probably moved by birds and kangaroos as the plants are covered in hooked hairs which cling to fur, feathers and socks. The plants are also self-fertile with hermaphroditic flowers. They often first appear in

shade under trees, but also grow in open areas.

The BGBG is primarily focussed on control of Cotton Bush, Paterson's Curse, foxes and rabbits within the Shire, but believe that this invasive and fast-moving weed must be dealt with immediately in a co-ordinated approach. Please report all sightings of these weeds in the Bridgetown-Greenbushes Shire to the BGBG on info@bgbg.org.au. BGBG member Andrew Mathews says this weed is now within 1km of high value native forest in the headwaters of the Donnelly River. It is a serious threat to the region's Ramsar wetlands as well as to riparian and upland bush environments and also to the local agriculture sector as a contaminant in hay and wool.



Cleavers on the bank of the Blackwood.
Photo: Andrew Mathews

The BGBG is also calling for residents to report sightings of sick or dead rabbits to assist with monitoring the spread of Rabbit Calicivirus and Myxomatosis. Fox and cat traps are also available for loan, as well as assistance with 1080 costs to landholders with a current 1080 baiting certificate.

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