

# Jean Lafitte National Historical Park and Preserve



## Giant Blue Iris

## Natural History Series

### Barataria's Best Known Wildflower

The giant blue iris (*Iris giganticaerulea*) is the star of the annual spring wildflower bloom at the Barataria Preserve of Jean Lafitte National Historical Park and Preserve. The colorful plants thrive in freshwater swamps and marshes such as those found in the Preserve and are a spectacular reminder of a now vanished Louisiana.

Giant blue irises were widespread throughout the state before wetlands were drained for agriculture, homes and other development. Decades of collecting by gardeners and iris growers also reduced Louisiana's wild iris population, leaving protected areas like the Barataria Preserve as their main habitat today.

The plants can reach heights of six feet, although most of the Preserve's irises are three to four feet tall when they are in bloom each spring. Although the species is called the "blue" iris, the flowers can range in color from pale blue to deep indigo.

Giant blue irises bloom throughout the Barataria Preserve in sunny swamp areas and drier marshland. They are particularly visible along the Bayou Coquille and Visitor Center Trails. For those travelling through the Preserve's canals and bayous by canoe, irises by the hundreds can be seen in the marshes and swamps.

### Legends and Lore

The giant blue iris is just one of over 1800 species of irises found worldwide. The flower takes its name from the ancient Greek goddess of the rainbow and signifies that it blooms in many colors. The fleur-de-lis of France is an iris, and it is prominent on the coat of arms of the royal family of the Bourbons, which included King Louis XIV for whom Louisiana is named. The official emblem of the City of New Orleans is the fleur-de-lis.

The French connection to irises begins with a legend involving Clovis, king of the Franks. In 496 A.D., Clovis was facing an invading army, his troops trapped against a river. He prayed his men would be safe. Then he saw a wild yellow iris blooming in the river. The king knew that water shallow enough for irises to grow in would also be shallow enough for his soldiers to ford on foot, and he led his army across the river to safety. Clovis incorporated the yellow iris into his banner and it became the symbol of French monarchs over the years.



### Rhizomes and Red Irises

The iris propagates by sending out thick, creeping rhizomes, subterranean stems or roots that spread out below ground and sprout above ground. The sprouts will display only leaves for the first year or two and then will begin to bloom each spring.

Irises also reproduce via cross-pollination between plants and the production of seed pods. This method has allowed the giant blue iris to be the parent species for many iris hybrids.

The showy flowers of the iris are actually a way to attract bees, the major iris pollinator, during the highly competitive spring blooming season. Although the flowers attract many insects other than bees, the swamps and marshlands in which irises grow provide plenty of nutrients for extra pollen production. The distinctive vertical leaves of the iris allow the plant to receive the maximum amount of sunlight in tightly packed iris colonies, providing plenty of energy for photosynthesis.

Although most of the irises in the Barataria Preserve are the giant blue variety, visitors may come across irises that are of the reddish, copper colored or even yellow. The copper or red iris, *Iris fulva*, was introduced to the world in the early 1800s after botanists found some growing in the New Orleans area. European gardeners and scientists had never before seen a red iris and it caused a major sensation in horticultural sensations. Look for red irises along the Palmetto Trail and on the east or Bayou des Familles side of Barataria Boulevard, about halfway between the Visitor Center and the Bayou Coquille Trail.

## Pneumonia and Perfumes

In the days before most people had access to drugstores, pharmacies, and doctors, the rhizomes of the iris were a source of medicine. The rhizome contains a strong, acrid resin that was used by herbalists for treatment of chronic vomiting, heartburn, liver and gall bladder ailments, scrofula (swollen lymph glands in the neck), skin diseases, and migraines. The iris was sometimes known as the “pneumonia plant” because a strong tea made from the rhizomes was used as a treatment for pneumonia.

It was also discovered that after drying for a few months, iris rhizomes gain a sweet scent similar to violets. Rhizomes were once ground into powder and made into pomander balls as a portable perfume for the wealthy. In Italy, the rootstock was used by perfumeries for perfumes, soaps and cosmetics. The French once used roasted and ground iris seeds as a coffee. The leaves of irises have been used to make green dye and the roots used to make black dye and inks.



## Look But Don't Touch!

Like all flowers at the Barataria Preserve, wild irises are protected and should never be picked or dug up. An iris removed from the wild is an iris that will no longer give pleasure to hundreds of people who view it. It is also an iris that will not feed wetland insects and animals with its pollen, seedpods and foliage or reproduce to create hundreds of irises for the future.

The Barataria Preserve is one of the last places in southeastern Louisiana where wild irises bloom in the thousands as they used to do in areas now devoted to homes and businesses. Please help the Preserve and the National Park Service preserve these breathtaking plants, a symbol of our beautiful Louisiana wetlands and a national treasure.