The Iris Garden at the Birmingham Botanical Gardens reflects an interest in these lovely flowers that is as old as gardening itself. For example, more than 4,000 years ago, irises were the state flowers of Cretan kings. Moreover, the heraldic emblem of France, the fleur de lis, began as an iris chosen by King Louis VII as his personal symbol during his reign in 12th century France.

Today, irises are popular because they are easy to grow and boast such beautiful flowers. The blossoms come in just about every color—blue, purple, white, yellow, orange, and bronze—and many are bicolored. In fact, the Greek word “iris” recalls the flower’s resemblance to the rainbow.

Donated by Fay and Bill Ireland, longtime supporters of the Botanical Gardens, the Iris Garden was the first garden designated to be built as part of the Botanical Gardens’ master plan. Of particular note are the beautiful stone retaining walls. As you enter the garden through a gazebo flanked by Indian hawthornes, the crushed brick path soon takes you past a large hickory on the left. Notice the masses of diminutive crested iris (*Iris cristata*) and vernal iris (*I. verna*) planted beneath it.

Looking across at the Iris Garden, you see two large, crescent-shaped terraces. The lower terrace contains a lovely herbaceous border. The border was planted with the idea that an assemblage of many diverse irises may be a collection, but to truly be called a garden, it must be displayed with a variety of compatible plants. Of course, the border also lends interest and color when the irises are out of bloom.

Designed by Birmingham landscape architects Norman Johnson and John Tate, the border features bands of color repeated at regular intervals. Cool colors (whites, blues, and pinks) predominate, so that attention won’t be diverted from the surrounding irises. Among the most notable perennials included are peonies, phlox, loosestrife (*Lythrum virgatum*), sedum, Stoke’s aster (*Stokesia laevis*), coral bells (*Heuchera sanguinea*), columbine, Japanese anemones (*Anemone japonica*), and Russian sage (*Perovskia atriplicifolia*).

The upper terrace is devoted solely to displaying and evaluating irises. Included are many selections of German bearded, Siberian, Dutch, Japanese, and Louisiana irises. The Dutch irises are first to show their jewel-like blossoms, generally in mid-to late April. The others follow shortly in a sequence that lasts well into June.

A pool lies in the center of the garden. It appears tilted to one side, but this is so that it will conform to the contours of the sight. Japanese irises are planted inside the pool. Yellow flags (*Iris pseudacorus*) are planted along the outside, along with Italian bugloss (*Anchusa azurea*), lamb’s-ears (*Stachys lanata*), and blue fescue (*Festuca glauca*).

As lovely as the Iris Garden is today, it will become even lovelier. Many other irises will be planted and evaluated. Eventually, the screen of Leyland cypress (*Cupressocyparis leylandii*) will completely block the view of the road. So if you enjoy the garden now, be sure to return many times in the future.
The Iris Garden
Given by
Fay and Bill Ireland
Dedicated May 1986

The South Gazebo
Given by
The James C. Lee, Jr. Family
and
Elizabeth Lee Frommeyer
in loving memory of
Elizabeth Turley Lee
and
James Coleman Lee
Dedicated May 1986

Designed by W. Fancher Lane
Written by Stephen Bender

The Birmingham Botanical Gardens
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Birmingham, Alabama