

Iris season never ends for Joe Ghio by Jory John

Posted: 09/27/2010 Santa Cruz Sentinel Newspaper

SANTA CRUZ -- These days, award-winning iris hybridizer Joe Ghio is mostly competing with himself. An American Iris Society award winner, Ghio, 71, is considered one of the top hybridizers in the world. And, when you're at the top, he said, you just have to try to outdo yourself.

"You want to put out stuff that's better than what's on the market," Ghio said. "It's not as difficult because I have lines that are well-advanced. They're an extension of me."

The Santa Cruz native, who has been breeding irises for 58 years, continues to find joy in the work. He is essentially a one-man operation, hybridizing irises as well as occasional roses, zucchini and more in the backyard of his Westside house, and on his seven-acre ranch in Corralitos.

Last week, Ghio held his fourth annual One-Hour Iris Sale, where he put his end-of-the-season surplus flowers up for grabs. Everything Ghio set out sold within 10 minutes, he said. Iris aficionados drove in from as far as Fresno.

Born in Santa Cruz in 1938, Ghio's father was a fisherman while his mother came from a farming background. In 1953, a then-teenage Ghio came across a copy of a catalog featuring the top 10 irises of the year, and was immediately fascinated by the colors, he said. He sent away for a \$5 collection of rhizomes.

After studying up on hybridizing, Ghio began creating his own plants in 1954, and he's never stopped, even while pursuing other demanding lines of work.

A graduate of San Jose State with a degree in business education, Ghio moved to Hayward in 1960, where he took a job as a high school business and history teacher. In 1967, Ghio moved back to Santa Cruz and accepted a teaching position at Harbor High School.

In the mid-'70s, Ghio entered local politics. He was Santa Cruz mayor in 1975, 1977 and 1980. He also served on the city council for three terms.

But it is the iris that has always captured his imagination.

In 1980, Ghio was the recipient of the American Iris Society Dykes Memorial Medal. The medal is the highest honor bestowed by the AIS, given to one iris per year. Ghio said he wants to win that elusive second medal.

While the iris season is over for the year, Ghio already has his sights set on next season.

"I'm basically doing this all myself," he said. "I should be living the lifestyles of the rich and famous by now, but I'm not quite there yet."



Joe Ghio - photo by Bill Lovejoy

GETTING TO KNOW Joe Ghio

MOTTO: 'Set a goal and work for it. It doesn't just happen.'

CURRENT GOAL: To win the American Iris Society Dykes Memorial Medal for the second time.

WHERE THE FIRST DYKES MEDAL SITS: 'It's nothing fancy. It's in a box.'

HAS SHIPPED HIS IRISES TO SUCH FARAWAY PLACES AS: Russia, Australia, Ukraine, Japan and Czechoslovakia. 'It's really cool to see pictures of my flowers in all those different places. Theoretically, they could be out there forever.'

FOUNDING MEMBER: Monterey Bay Iris Society; Monterey Bay Rose Society; Monterey Bay Dahlia Society

MAYOR OF SANTA CRUZ: Three times, 1975, 1977, 1980; also served on the council three different terms, ending in 1990. 'I loved it. I slowly eased out of teaching to concentrate on politics. And I would continue doing it, but you can't get elected more than three terms.'

BOUGHT A SEVEN-ACRE RANCH IN CORRALITOS In 1994: 'The climate and soil were outstanding, but they wanted too much money, so I waited for two-and-a-half years, before they lowered their price.'

Celebrated his 70TH BIRTHDAY PARTY In 2008: 'You had to come dressed as a famous person, or thing, from 1938. Costumes included a couple outfits from 'War of the Worlds.' People also showed up dressed as Superman, Charlie Chan, Mae West and Eleanor Roosevelt.'

ROOTS: Born at the Hanley Hospital in 1938; went to school at Bay View, Mission Hill and Santa Cruz High School, before receiving a degree in business education at San Jose State.

FOR A CATALOG OF GHIO'S FLOWERS: Send \$3 to Bayview Gardens, 1201 Bay St., Santa Cruz, CA 95060.