

# 1 American Iris Society: Founders of SIGNA Medal-SPEC

**History:** by Clarence Mahan

This medal is restricted to species irises (SPEC) and is named to honor the founding members of the Species Iris Group of North American (SIGNA).

The first issue of SIGNA, published in April 1968, lists forty charter members of the Species Iris Group of North America. The first organization meeting was held in May 1966. Roy Davidson was subsequently elected chairman of the new group and Betty Rowe was elected secretary/treasurer. Bruce Richardson became the first editor; Thomas J. Buckley was designated librarian; and Ruth Hardy agreed to take on duties as seed exchange director. One of the first acts of the new group was to publish the Species Iris Study Manual. The success of the organization in its formative years was to a considerable degree the result of the leadership skills of Roy Davidson and the editorial work of Bruce Richardson of Hamilton, Ontario, Canada.

Awards for species and inter species hybrid irises within the AIS awards system became a reality in 1994. As a result SIGNA designed and cast "The Founders of SIGNA Medal" for species and the "Randolph-Perry Medal" for inter species hybrids. The medals were first presented in 2000 after the candidates had progressed through the AIS award system.

## **Winners: THE FOUNDERS OF SIGNA MEDAL-SPEC**

2012 Z Z ZANZIBAR (Brad Kasperek)  
2011 SEAKRILL (Jill Copeland)  
2010 RASPBERRY SLURP (Rita Butler)  
2009 PETIT LION (Lowell Baumunk)  
2008 KRILL (Jill Copeland)  
2007 BAYOU BANDIT (Jeff Weeks by Farron Campbell)  
2006 JOHN WOOD (John Wood by Everette Lineberger)  
2005 POWDER BLUE GIANT (Sam Norris by Schafer/Sacks)  
2004 CHINA WEST LAKE (James Waddick)  
2003 MARVELL GOLD (James Waddick)  
2002 CANDYSTRIPER (Bee Warburton)  
2001 BETWEEN THE LINES Marty Schafer & Jan Sacks  
2000 DOTTED LINE (L. Reid)

**Further History:** Updated and edited SIGNA history below by Christopher Hollinshead May 2011 (edited from material originally from SIGNA)

In 1968, under the leadership of Species Robin Chairman Roy Davidson, the members of the eight AIS species robins formed a Species Study Group under the wing of the AIS Scientific Committee. The robins provided sufficient material by April of 1968 for editor Bruce Richardson to publish the first newsletter for this new study group of 87 members. Bruce suggested the title SIGNA (Species Iris Group of North America) as a suitable name as it meant signal in Latin and it was intended to send out a signal far and wide, additionally it referred to the signal patch on many iris falls. The SIGNA Newsletter was intended to be the vital link binding the group together, since geography kept the members far apart. The Species Robins were full of timely and interesting iris information. It was felt that this information should be shared and placed in a permanent form where it could become a useful reference. The publication was to be limited to information on species iris and first or second generation crosses only. Hybridizing was not the object but rather the preservation of the wild species.

More than forty years later, SIGNA has published 4000+ pages of valuable information about all aspects of species irises both in the wild and in cultivation. Back issues of SIGNA are available and are still in demand because most of the information in them is still relevant. Many of the drawings within the publication were done for SIGNA specifically and can be found nowhere else. Information in these provides cultural information for species iris and encourages growing of supposedly difficult plants. It is still the vital link binding this widespread and diverse membership together.

Over the years SIGNA membership has continued to grow under the fine leadership of people such as; Roy Davidson, Jean Witt, Elaine Hulbert, Colin Rigby, Richard Kiyomoto, Carla Lankow and William Plotner. SIGNA now has a membership of over 700 in the United States and 30 foreign countries.

In November 1967, six months before the first SIGNA publication, Ruth Hardy put together the first Species Seed Exchange. This was an idea that fit well with the aims of the group to spread knowledge of iris species by growing them. The SIGNA seed exchange makes the distribution of unusual species possible. What may be a common garden plant in one part of the world may be very rare elsewhere. SIGNA has also helped sponsor several trips to collect species iris plants and seed. One such trip was Dr. Waddick's 1983 trip to China. The seed exchange was then an instrument to distribute seed from these trips. Previously few people had heard of *I. typhifolia* but because of Dr. Waddick's expedition and the seed exchange, it is now a fairly common garden plant with some new cultivars on the horizon

The first SIGNA meeting was at the Berkeley AIS Convention in April 1969. There was little business but plenty of good slides and it ended with a Wild Iris Tour to Santa Cruz on Monterey Bay where the participants saw both redwood trees and wild irises. The aim of SIGNA at that meeting and tour (as it still is today) was to study the range of habitat of the species to gain insight into the culture of the species and toward education on species variation and identification as the basis for judging.

In 1972 SIGNA became a Section of the AIS. That same year the initial part of the SIGNA Species Study Manual was distributed to the membership. The main body of loose leaf A-Z pages came the next year followed by additions annually until 1980. Brian Mathew's excellent book, *The Iris*, contained the information that was needed so no more additions were provided. SIGNA continues to be involved in several projects that continue to stress education and research on the species. Many of these have or will become books by noted scientists such as George Rodionenko and Maria Colasante and will be available through SIGNA publications.

One such publication is the SIGNA Checklist that was put together after over 10 years of work by several devoted members of SIGNA. The Species Checklist contains an alphabetical listing of all known species iris clones and cultivars. The checklist will also be published in taxonomic form to provide a needed manual of cultivars for hybridizers and collectors as well as the average gardener.

SIGNA has supported species iris related events; the International Species Symposium in 1995 and the Siberian-Species Convention in 1996 in Massachusetts, the 2003 Siberian-Species Convention in Ontario, Canada and a subsequent Siberian-Species convention in Portland Oregon in 2006. Through these SIGNA continues towards the goals of education on species variation and identification and the preservation of all iris species.