

U3A GARDEN GROUP



At last, our Group meeting was on a bright and sunny day - a bit windy, but thankfully no rain. Twenty of us met in the Iris Garden car park – for some it was a repeat visit, but the first visit for others. First stop, the labyrinth –



Christine Lomer and Nick Brown first opened their Iris Garden at Marnes in April 2006 and they offer a huge variety of irises in every colour of the rainbow.

They appear to be the easiest plant to grow – they enjoy the baking heat of the summer and even a winter frost. They are completely drought tolerant, and since there is no irrigation water, they are never watered. Only new plantings in September/October are watered if there is no autumn rain.



Not only are there over 100 varieties of dwarf and standard irises on offer, but the gardens are coloured by a large variety of other plants including climbing roses, anemones, buddleias, salvias, pelargoniums and many more.





The iris has a long history, starting with Iris, the Greek goddess of the rainbow and a messenger of the gods. One of her main duties was to lead the souls of the dead, particularly women, to the Elysian Fields. The Greeks planted purple bearded irises on the graves of women.



Similarly Muslims in many countries have decorated graves with white irises (*Iris albicans*). Hence there has been tremendous movement of irises from their original habitats to burial sites all over the Middle East.



Christine told us that irises were brought to Spain by the Moors in the 8th century, to mark their burial sites in this country. Since the iris is such a hardy and drought tolerant plant, it would provide an almost permanent memorial to the dead.



The tripartite flowers found favour with the early Christians and came to represent the Holy Trinity. In its stylised form the 'fleur de lys', the iris was an emblem of the French monarchy from the 12th century; it also appears in the arms of the city of Florence. In the case of Florence, the iris provided a source of considerable wealth to the city. In the fields around Florence bearded irises grow abundantly.



In mediaeval times the rhizomes of initially *Iris florentina* but subsequently *Iris pallida* were gathered, dried in the sun and ground to form a white powder called 'orris root'. This powder was used for a variety of purposes including dusting hair, skin and teeth, where its mildly insecticidal qualities were very beneficial. It has a scent reminiscent of violets or vanilla so is still used in perfumery and to make products like pot-pourri today. It is also reputedly added to the casks of Chianti wine in the latter stages of fermentation to give it its characteristic aroma and flavour.



The beautiful mountain setting of the gardens certainly makes it a place worthy of many revisits and Christine and Nick are constantly stocking new breeds of iris which will be available for purchase next year.



Following the visit we made our way to Bar Restaurant Pinos and enjoyed their excellent food and wine with plenty of time to chat about gardening tips, along with a few other things!



We were even serenaded while we ate!

