

## Iridaceae

### Iris family

A family of about 1800 species, it is centred about South Africa. Many cultivars have been formed of the crocus, iris and gladiolus genera, and are widely planted here. All have showy regular flowers and may be distinguished from the liliaceous plants by their possession of only three stamens and an inferior ovary. Most are perennial herbs with straplike leaves arising from creeping rhizomes or fibrous roots. Leaves in our species are oriented edgewise to the stem. Flowers are arranged in a spicate inflorescence or solitary and usually subtended by a floral bract if solitary, or by two bracts if in a spike. The perianth has two whorls of three tepals. Fruits are firm capsules with three locules containing round seeds.

#### Key to genera

Flowers 6–12cm wide; plants 40–100cm tall.

*Iris*

Flowers less than 2cm wide; plants 10–50cm tall.

*Sisyrinchium*

### *Iris* L.

#### iris

*Iris* is a genus of mostly northern-hemisphere perennials totalling about 200 species. Stems arise from rhizomes or bulbs, enlarging above to produce vegetative leaves, branches and stems, which may be simple or branched, terete or flattened. Leaves are smooth or ridged and sometimes thicker in the centre, with the cauline leaves resembling the basal leaves and all sheathing. Flowers have two spathes, which may persist and enclose capsule. They are sessile or pedicellate, the perianths epigynous and ranging in colours from pink, blue, yellow and brown, with contrasting colours and petals distinctly different from the sepals and from 4–18cm across.

#### Key to species

A. Flowers yellow, 1–1.5m tall; capsule >5cm long.

*Iris pseudacorus*

aa. Flowers blue, plant to 80cm tall, capsule about 5cm long.

B

B. Leaves long, linear, 3–7mm wide; capsules sharply 3-angled.

*I. prismatica*

bb. Leaves 5–30mm wide; capsule bluntly three-angled, or with 6 angles.

C

C. Petals  $\frac{1}{4}$  length of the sepals, tubular.

*I. setosa*

cc. Petals  $\frac{1}{2}$  length of sepals, flat.

*I. versicolor*

***Iris prismatica* Pursh****Slender Blue Flag; iris prismatique**

Photo by John Crabtree

The long linear leaves are distinctive, as they rarely reach 7mm wide. Petals are oblanceolate. 3–4cm long and flat. The sharply angled capsule is especially distinctive when fresh, appearing almost winged.

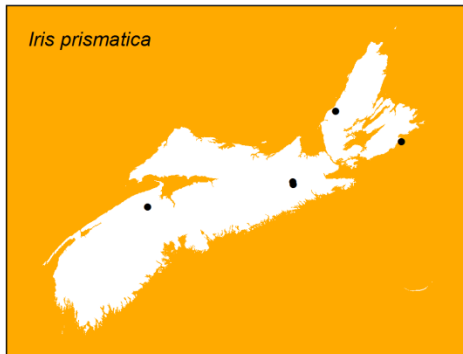
Flowers mid-July.

Grows on wet substrate near the coast.

Historically collected from Annapolis, Guysborough (1960s) and Inverness counties (1980s). So far elusive from other counties.

Ranges from NS; ON; ME to GA and TN.

STATUS: ORANGE-listed in NS.

***Iris pseudacorus* L.****Yellow Iris; iris faux-acoire**

Taller, this iris has long slender stems that reach upwards of 1m in height. Flowers are bright yellow, the narrow petals about half the length of the sepals. Capsules are six-angled, a feature that separates them from the blue-flowered native species.

Flowers in June and July.

Photo by Martin Thomas



Photo by Ross Hall

Spreading from gardens to nearby wetlands, streamsides and meadows.

Established from Yarmouth, Digby and Annapolis counties and also at several Cape Breton stations.

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Naturalised from Europe. Found from NF to MB: BC, and variously south and west to CA, TX and FL.

### ***Iris setosa* Pallas**

#### **Beach Blue Flag; iris d'Alaska**

It is much shorter than our other irises, barely reaching 30cm in height. Petals are tubular and relatively undeveloped. The capsule is acute at the apex and blunt on the angles. Our variety is smaller and distinguished as var. *canadensis* Foster.

Flowers about mid-June.

Found only along the coast: beaches, headlands, cliffs.

Common along the Bay of Fundy and around the Cape Breton coast. Scattered along the south shore, but uncommon from the Strait of Canso through the Northumberland area.

Ranges from NF to ON, south to NH. AK south to BC.

### ***Iris versicolor* L.**

#### **Blue Flag; iris versicolore**



Photo by Martin Thomas

A robust iris, 50–80cm tall, its leaves are about 1.5mm wide. Petals are well-developed with an obvious blade, more than half as long as the sepals. This is our most common native iris. Albino forms have been collected at Aulds Cove, Guysborough Co. and on Seal Island, Yarmouth Co.

Flowers during June and July.

Found in meadows, swamps and along streams; weedy in



Photo by Sean Blaney

pastures.

Common throughout the province.

Ranges from NL to MB, south to VA and IL; ID.

***Sisyrinchium* L.**  
**blue-eyed grass**

A genus of about 80 species, mostly new world, although one is native to NZ. They are annual or perennial herbs, caespitose or rhizomatous. The stems are scapose or branched and compressed, with two wings. The leaves, 2–6 may be basal or both basal and cauline. They are usually edgewise to the stem, glabrous and sometimes glaucous. The inflorescence usually produces from 1–11 flowers with two opposite spathes. The flowers are not fragrant. Tepals are divergent or reflexed, bluish to pinkish and yellow, and without claws. Filaments and styles are connate at the base or forming a tube. Fruits are capsules, rounded at the apex and with many rounded black seeds.

Key to species

- A. Spathe sessile distally, generally solitary. *Sisyrinchium montanum*
- aa. Spathes on long slender stalks from the axil of a leafy bract. B
  - B. Stem narrowly winged, 0.5–2mm wide. C
  - bb. Stem broadly winged, (2)2.5–4mm wide. *S. angustifolium*
    - C. Leaf bases not becoming tufts of bristles. *S. atlanticum*
    - cc. Leaf bases persisting as tufts of fibrous bristles. *S. fuscatum*

***Sisyrinchium angustifolium* P. Mill.**  
**bermudienne à feuilles étroites**



Photo by Martin Thomas

Broadly winged stems may reach 50cm, with the wings wider than the central portion of the stem. The pedunculate spathes have the outer bract evidently longer than the inner bract.

Flowers from June to August.

Found in moist areas.

Common in Yarmouth and Shelburne counties, scattered eastward to southern Cape Breton.

Ranges from NS to ON, south to FL and TX; WY; BC to OR. A coastal plain species.

***Sisyrinchium atlanticum* EP Bicknell**  
**bermudienne de l'Atlantique**



Photo by Martin Thomas

A slender species, it barely reaches 50cm tall. The narrow leaves are ascending to spreading. Two or more spathes are borne on slender pedicels from the bracteal leaf axil. The two bracts forming the spathe are nearly equal in size. Flowers are much like those of *S. montanum* but smaller, 3–4mm long. The ovary and capsule are black. Its taller, flexuous habit is distinctive in the field.

Flowers in June.

Found in damp peat, sandy soils that are poorly drained.

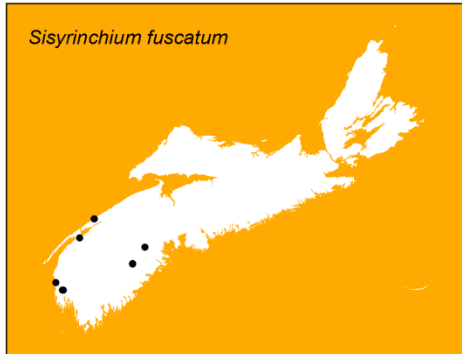
Common from Yarmouth and Shelburne counties east to Lunenburg Co. Scattered elsewhere.

Ranges from NS; ME to WI, south to TX and FL. A coastal plain species.



Photo by Martin Thomas

***Sisyrinchium fuscatum* EP Bicknell**  
**bermudienne fauve**



Distinct from our other species, it may be separated on the basis of persistent brown leaf base fibres. The plant is said to turn dark upon drying. While fresh it is not glaucous. The stem has a single node. Ovary is green, same as the leaves while the capsule turns brown.

Flowers from May to early July.

Grows on sandy soils.

Rare. Collected only from western counties.

Ranges from NS; MA south to FL. Rarely inland. A coastal plain species.

STATUS: ORANGE-listed in NS.

***Sisyrinchium montanum* Greene**  
**bermudienne montagnarde**



Photo by Sean Blaney

Grasslike and reaching only 20–30cm tall, this species has the leaves mostly basal and shorter than the culm. Flowers are violet-blue, arranged in an umbellate inflorescence, opening sequentially. They are about 1.5cm wide, yellow in the centre. The spathe is usually solitary and sessile, comprising two unequal bracts, the larger, several cms long. Capsule is ovoid, 4–5mm long.

Two varieties are recognised, scarcely separable

var. *crebrum* has the margins of outer spathe connate basally for 4–5.7 mm; plants drying dark brown or bronze. The typical variety has the margins of outer spathe connate basally for only 1–3.5 mm; plants drying green to olive.

Our material should be assessed to determine which



*Photo by Sean Blaney*

material belongs to which variety.

Flowers late May through June.

Habitat preferences are wide, from fields, meadows, open forests to roadsides.

Very common throughout.

Ranges from NF to AK, south to BC; ID and TX in the west, and NC in the east.