Iris pumila

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Originally appeared in the *Dwarf Iris Society Beginners' Manual,* c. 1965. Photos have been added, and the text has been edited slightly to note current species names (in square brackets) and to conform with modern typographical conventions.

When we come to *I. pumila*, we are dealing with the recognized "King of the Dwarfs." In the botanical classification, *I. pumila* is distinguished as representing the "type" of the dwarf iris group, as this section is titled the "Pumilae Section."

I. pumila was collected and described by Linnaeus in 1753, and the location was Austria. It is the only species which has never been questioned or its status disturbed by subsequent botanists. The name is derived from the Latin *pumilus,* meaning dwarf, diminutive.

I. pumila has the largest distribution area of any known iris, extending from Austria, down the basin of the Danube through Hungary, Rumania, Bulgaria, down onto the island of Crete, and over into the Ukraine, Donets, Kuban basin, and the Crimea in Russia.

Certainly with so wide a range with its possibilities of variation, we could expect a rather interesting diversity of forms as it progressed into distant lands and different environments, and this actually occurs. Up in Austria we find more coarse forms, with wider and longer leaves, and shorter bloom stalks; and over in Russia the daintiness increases, with shorter and more narrow leaves, longer and more slender stalks, and blooms smaller and more narrow in the segments. Then the Serbian and some of the Rumanian forms show a still different overall variation, the whole plant larger in all its parts and apparently a better grower for some climates. Yet for a species of such widespread populations, the general similarity is surprisingly close.

I. pumila is particularly distinguished for its short and almost nonexistent stem, with the ovary practically sitting upon the rhizome, and with its long perianth tube rising to support the flower, which is as high or higher than the leaves. This height ranges from about 3 to 5 inches, though most are about 4½ inches high. Some of the Serbian forms will average to 5 or 6 inches. And from reports on a few Russian forms we know, really not enough for a decisive opinion, some have been found having a stem an inch or more

I. pumila ex Armenia
photo: Tom Waters

I. pumila ex Hungary
photo: Sean Zera

I. pumila ex Czechia
photo: Tom Waters

in length, which is in contrast to the western group of *pumila.* The bloom is in nice proportion to the plant, the whole presenting a dainty ensemble that makes it a veritable bouquet.

The rhizome of *pumila* is highly prolific of bloom stalks, in that we often find up to eight of these stalks expressed as tiny side fans on a single rhizome, and each with its own terminal bud. A clump thus becomes a solid mass of bloom and eliminates the necessity of, and compensates for the lack of, branching. *I. pumila* is shallow rooted, thus requiring frequent replanting and a good garden soil to do its best. The spathe valves are closely wrapping the stem, are rounded with a slight keeling on the outer valve, the valves showing a scarious or onion-skin texture at their upper tips, often reddish. But they are neat and rather inconspicuous.

The ovary or seed pod is quite distinctive in *pumila.* It is rounded and pointed, looking much like an acorn; it is variable in size from one half to over an inch in diameter and plainly shows the seams which outline its three compartments. On the inside of the pod are three sections making a complete division in the upper half of the pod, but in the lower half the walls are open into each other. No other iris is known to have this distinctive character, except its close relative *I. attica,* which some think may be the immediate parent of *pumila,* and *I. chamaeiris* [*I. lutescens*], which is apparently a hybrid involving either *I. pumila* or *I. pseudopumila,* both of which are very close relatives, and hence derived this characteristic from *pumila.* The walls and outer shell are thin and papery when ripe, of a dull warm grayish color resembling parchment.

The flower also has a distinctive character. The standards are arched and just short of meeting at the top, the tips reflexed or turned outward, in typical forms. Most of the species tend toward tucking or a reflexed condition of the falls. The segments as they rise from the perianth tube show a definite triangle or vase-like form to where the falls turn abruptly outward, in contrast to the gradual curve that is apparent in other irises.

But it is in color and pattern forms that *I. pumila* demonstrates that it is the "King of the Dwarfs." No other species can boast of as many variations and combination of as many colors and patterns as *I. pumila.* With four basic color factors, violet, purple, yellow, and white, we have obtained a range from black through the violets, to blue, purple, reddish, lavender, orchid pinks, greens, browns, blends, yellow to orange, ivory, or white. With the spot pattern we get amoena, variegata, neglecta, and numerous combinations and variations, in addition to clear self patterns, bitones and bicolors as pinnacles. [Probably a reference to TB 'Pinnacle' (Stevens, 1949), the first white and yellow bicolor.—*Ed.*]

Beards are of special interest in the pumilas. The yellows have only white beards, always. When I write of beards, I mean the part which shows out on the falls, for this is the only part which shows any variation. All pumilas have yellow to reddish-orange beard color down inside the flower. But on the anthocyanin-colored flowers we have dark violet, purple, lavender, blue, and white beards. No yellow beard is known at present in pure *pumila.*

I. pumila is the only species in iris that has a true violet-blue color, and apparently it is one of the components in the violet factor, for in breeding violets we get blues. Another fact which indicates that it is a different anthocyanin from the other irises, is that the anthocyanin inhibitor does not suppress *pumila* blue, but it does suppress the blue of talls.