Iris mellita [*Iris suaveolens*]

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Here we have the "delightful iris," from the Latin *mellitus,* meaning delightful. It was collected and described by Victor Janka von Bules, abbreviated Janka, in 1874. *I. mellita* resides in that area above *attica* and below *pumila,* away from the Mediterranean and extending from the Albanian area, through the Balkan zone, and over into Turkey along the Black Sea.

I. mellita is another species which we have not explored fully, leaving much to be desired in the way of offering a full description of its inherent capacities. We have, however, had some collected forms to grow and study. The plants we know here are usually of a smoky red-purple or a smoky blend of purple and yellow, although Dykes says that clear yellows are found in the Turkish area.

I. mellita is a little plant, seldom growing over 4 or 5 inches, and its most conspicuous character is its sickle-shaped leaves. The leaves are rather coarse and deep green, the spathe valves are long, all green, sharply keeled and coarse, resembling some additional leaves. From these spathe valves rise two buds on slender wiry perianth tubes, which extend well above the half prostrate leaves. As with *pumila,* the ovary is at the base of the stem down among the leaves. The shape of the ovary resembles that of *pumila.*

The flower of *mellita* is highly distinctive, easily recognizable by anyone who has once seen it, and it is quite strong in dominance, being apparent in its hybrid progeny. the standards are about twice the size of the falls, more cupped-shaped than arched, leaving them quite open at the top, and they are wide. The falls are always abruptly tucked, even folding back to the perianth tube. The texture and substance is noticeably thin and papery, but in spite of this appearance, the flower is able to stand unusual wear and handling. The beard on the purple form is an electric violet or blue, really brilliant, while on the so-called yellow forms it is always white. *I. mellita* always has what we call an entire beard, that is, it is one

I. suaveolens
photo: Peter Bohnert

I. suaveolens
photo: Sean Zera

I. suaveolens f. *rubromarginata*
photo: Sean Zera

color its entire length. It also is distinctive in that the beard is soft and meager, like cat fur that has matted down. *I. mellita* always has purplish veins radiating from the base of standards and rather conspicuous on the falls, particularly on the haft, which shows over a white area around the beard.

There is another form called *I. rubromarginata* [*I. suaveolens* f. *rubromarginata*], which is evidently just a varietal form of *I. mellita.* It gets its name from a red margin or edging to its leaves and on the tips of the spathe valves. Strangely, this red margin is most clearly visible during heavy growth in spring and in the fall, whereas during the hot summer months it seldom is very noticeable. The leaves as a whole seem to be darker than on the forms without the red edge.

I. rubromarginata was collected by Baker in 1875 from a locality near Thrace. The fact that it grows right along with the *mellita* forms in the same populations would indicate that it is merely a normal segregate in the *mellita* composition.

Genetically, *mellita* is a diploid with 24 chromosomes. Hybrids of diploid talls X *mellita* have been studied and found to produce 12 bivalents at meiosis, indicating that the chromosomes are homologous with those of talls. This makes it a useful plant for bringing down some of the TB characters into the dwarfs.

A word about culture is not amiss here, for many people have difficulty in growing *mellita.* To do well, it should be separated and transplanted every year, in sufficient time to become well established before winter. It requires rich soil with good drainage to do its best. The soil should be a sandy loan, mixed with peat moss and compost. It should be kept moist until well established. After seeing a natural planting in a wood on a steep slope in half shade doing so very well, I have concluded that such a condition is the ideal situation for growing this species.