

# SLI Returns to The Big Easy in 2020

## ~Story & Photos by Patrick O'Connor

The SLI Annual Convention returns to New Orleans in 2020, a bit sooner than expected, but with some differences. It will not be a joint convention with the American Iris Society as it was in 2018, and thus, it will be a smaller, cozier event with lower, cozier costs. It should still be great fun, and all the attractions that make New Orleans interesting will still be available. You'll find the hotel and registration details in this issue of the *Fleur*.

The Convention will be a bit shorter than in the past, running from Thursday, April 3 through Saturday, April 5. Thursday is limited to evening activities, including a mixer and a meeting of the SLI Board. You'll have to plan to arrive on Thursday, though, since the tours will begin early the next day. The show continues through Sunday.

The action will be packed principally into Friday and Saturday, April 4-5. Friday will feature a foray twenty miles south to the Town of Jean Lafitte, where a boardwalk offers easy access to a Louisiana swamp. The area is the natural habitat of the abundant *I. giganticaerulea*, but *fulvas* and natural hybrids have also been found in the area. The boardwalk begins in the Town and is less than a mile in length while offering all the sights you would expect to see in a swamp habitat. The Town of Jean Lafitte is essentially a fishing village that hugs the east side of Bayou Barataria. The road through the town ends a few miles to the south, where the marsh along the Gulf begins.



If nature does not cooperate in providing bloom at convention time, this tour may switch to some equally interesting natural areas on the Northshore of Lake Pontchartrain near Mandeville and Lacombe. The dates chosen for the convention are in the middle of the “normal” bloom season in the New Orleans area, but normally the weather is not normal. We think it will be this year.

The morning Friday will also consist of a visit to the Greater New Orleans Iris Society’s “Island Nursery” in City Park. The 2018 convention also toured here, but the time that was too limited given the extent of the plantings. The Island Nursery is in a work area of the park, not generally open to the public. The island consists of about eight acres surrounded by the lagoons of City Park, and a portion is fenced for horticultural uses by the New Orleans Botanical Garden. It has been used in many ways over the years, including as a tree farm and the set of a movie, and it is the process of redevelopment. After Hurricane Katrina, during which about six feet of water destroyed the tree farm, a Wetland Plant Center was developed as a means to propagate plants for restoration projects, and the Louisiana irises came in under that umbrella. Now the irises occupy roughly a half-acre inside the fence, and although not a landscaped area, it is a sight to see in bloom.



*The GNOIS Island Nursery*

The island nursery features a large collection of clones of all five species that are part of the SLI Species Preservation Project. There are over one hundred different collected forms of *giganticaerulea*, *fulva*, *nelsonii*, *brevicaulis*, and *hexagona*. There also is an extensive collection of cultivars. Much of the space on in the Island Nursery is devoted to maintaining and propagating irises for donations to public plantings and restoration projects.

Viewing the irises is the main order of business for the Island visit, but GNOIS is planning several demonstrations and breakout sessions on iris topics. The island perhaps was the most popular stop during the 2018 tours, and more time will be allotted this year. Lunch will be provided on the Friday tour, either on the island or at another location on the route.

Saturday will focus on activities in New Orleans City Park. Buses will drop attendees near the entrance to the New Orleans Botanical Garden, which is across the street from the Sydney and Walda Besthoff Sculpture Garden. The Sculpture Garden will open early for convention visitors, but the Botanical Garden will not open until 10 AM. Shortly after the Botanical Garden opens, the annual Symposium will be held in the Garden Studies Center of the Botanical Garden. The convention dates coincide with the Spring Garden Show in the Botanical Garden, and many vendors of plants and garden-related items will be set up for the weekend. The Garden has generously agreed that the Symposium can constitute the program in the Garden Studies Center on Saturday morning, so there will be many members of the public also in attendance.

The Botanical Garden itself will be of interest. It is a diverse and beautiful place and will be made even

more interesting by the presence of many vendors. There are ten acres of plants and art to enjoy. A conservatory displaying ferns and tropical plants is a favorite attraction, as is the recently opened (since the 2018 convention) sculpture garden dedicated to the works of Enrique Alf rez, a Mexican-American artist who moved to New Orleans in 1929. His sculptures and reliefs adorn many parks, buildings, and landmarks in New Orleans and throughout South Louisiana. He created numerous sculptures for New Orleans City Park through the Works Progress Administration, including many iconic bridges that cross City Park’s waterways.

The 2018 convention also visited City Park, but there has been a major addition. The Sydney and Walda Besthoff Sculpture Garden has been doubled in size with a beautiful extension populated with a different palette of plants. There are islands, bridges, and lots of water to display fascinating sculptures and art. Unlike the older section of the Sculpture Garden in which only cultivars are displayed, the iris plantings in the expansion are all species irises, including the four species native to Louisiana.



*In the Sculpture Garden expansion*

The Sculpture Garden expansion features a beautifully designed pavilion. It will be the location of the Louisiana Iris Show beginning Saturday and extending through Sunday.

The original Sculpture Garden contains the GNOIS Display Garden. Between the old and new parts, the Sculpture Garden comprises 90 sculptures spread over eleven beautiful acres.

The Saturday schedule is less structured than most tour days. You will have options for what you see and when you see it. Here is one example of how it might work:

The bus drops you off at 8:30 AM in City Park near the entrance to the old Sculpture Garden. Since the Garden will be open early for us, you can wander in and enjoy the GNOIS Display Garden and the many cultivars along the lagoon. If you need coffee and snacks, the famous Café Dumonde is located across the street. It serves not only coffee and café au lait but its famous beignets. At 10 AM, you can walk across the street to the Botanical Garden (you'll have an admission ticket in your registration packet; the Sculpture Garden is always free) and work your way a short distance to the Garden Studies Center to listen to the Annual Symposium on Louisiana Irises for about an hour and a half.

By then, you will be hungry. Lunch is on-your-own Saturday, and food will be available from vendors in the Botanical Garden and at Café NOMA, a Ralph Brennan restaurant in the Museum of Art (also just across the street). Parker's Café in the Amusement Park is also available for a quick meal. There are several places to eat just outside the Park, but they are not within walking distance for many people. The closest, and not too far from the Sculpture Garden at that, is Ralph's On The Park, a fine New Orleans restaurant and an excellent choice if you want to allot more time and money to lunch. After lunch, you can walk into the Sculpture Garden expansion. The Louisiana Iris Show should open at Noon or a little after in the Pavilion, so you can go there to see the entries or first stroll in the garden for a while. There are many things to look for, but the glass bridges across the lagoon, themselves pieces of art, are near the top of the list, as is the magnificent mural in the courtyard of the pavilion.

Getting tired? All of these attractions are adjacent to one another, but they cover several acres.

There will be some walking required, although all of the terrain is flat (you're in South Louisiana, after all).

There will be

benches and other places to sit along the way, but you can always come back into the original Sculpture Garden, where there will be chairs near the Display Garden and also water and refreshments. Some may want to go back to the hotel sooner rather than later, and there will be a shuttle bus running approximately on the hour beginning early Saturday afternoon.

If you need or crave iris judges training, there will be a session on garden judging in the Sculpture Garden in the afternoon. The last shuttle bus will not run until the training is done. If you have questions about the convention, hopefully you can find the answer in this issue of the Fleur. If not, feel free to contact Convention Chair Joe Musacchia. Email: [1cajunjoe@att.net](mailto:1cajunjoe@att.net) Cell: (985) 209-2917



*A glass bridge in the new Sculpture Garden*

The hotel for the convention is the Crowne Plaza, not far from the airport. You will note that the rates are reasonable. The GNOIS convention committee made an effort to find a nice place that offers good value to SLI members. Some are concerned about the expense of a convention in a tourist city such as New Orleans, and we have tried to address that so as many of our members as possible can join us to enjoy Louisiana irises in a unique area.

