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Arnie Koekkoek's Backyard Wonders

*Elisabeth McPherson Eberspacher*¹

The house itself doesn't strike one as anything overly remarkable. It's a normal, two-story yellow house with neat, white trim. What makes people wander through Arnold and Carol Koekkoek's yard on Seventh Street in Sioux Center is the flowers—lots and lots of flowers. If you've never noticed them while driving past, you're not alone. But take one step onto the driveway in the summer, and your senses will reel at the sights, sounds, and smells of the Koekkoeks' dazzling world of petals.

Piles of color spring from beds dug out of the soft ground. Bees, cicadas, and other buzzing things hum in the background, and the smell of dirt, pollen, and summer almost makes you light-headed. From the end of April to the end of June, their backyard is brimming with irises—Siberian irises, Tall Bearded irises, and Spuria irises; frilled irises and lacey irises; irises in butter yellow and sapphire blue, brilliant shades of almost every color imaginable.

It all started years ago, when Arnie saw an ad in a magazine for a collection of twelve different varieties of iris. "I didn't even know a dozen varieties existed at that point," he recalls. "And here was this color picture with all these different colors and styles and designs, and I thought, 'Wow, that would be neat to have,' and it was very cheap, so I ordered them."

Arnie and his family had just moved from California so that Arnie could teach history at Dordt College. He liked the flowers so much that when the family moved to Iowa City a few years later for graduate school, he dug the rhizomes up and planted them outside the window of their apartment. When the time came to move back to Sioux Center, the plants were hauled out of the earth and brought



back, along with a newly completed masters degree, coming into bloom just around the time that spring semester finals started.

"I always liked gardening," Arnie says, although he unabashedly admits he hates weeding, in part because of childhood horrors—he remembers pulling buckets of weeds from his mother's garden in central Washington. "She was always a little surprised that I garden as much as I do, since I complained about it so much as a boy," he says.

Within a few years of buying that first collection,

Arnie's garden had grown to include over ninety varieties of irises. In a town like Sioux Center, that's enough to get a person noticed, and a colleague wrote an article for the *Sioux City Journal*, featuring Arnie and his flowers. With its publication, the article drew the attention of some members of the area chapter of the American Iris Society. At their invitation, Arnie joined and soon realized that his garden was, as he put it, the tip of the iceberg. "After that," he says, "it just took off. The garden kept growing, and today we have about 625 different varieties, including several different types of irises."

Even his collection pales though in comparison with some of the major growers and hybridizers in the flower industry. If you get him talking about the iris growers on the West Coast, his keen eyes light up and that boom bass voice that once lectured on European history fills with awe as he tells of seeing row upon row of irises stretching out for miles—a slightly different sight than the fields of tulips the Dutch in these parts dream about.

But irises aren't all he grows.

The iris season ends as the summer begins to heat up. By mid-June, most of the irises are past their peak. In their place, the trumpet blooms of lilies explode in a fanfare of vibrancy.

Most of these are Asiatic lilies, better known in Sioux Center as Centennial lilies. There's also a stout vegetable garden with tomatoes, zucchini, squash, several varieties of sweet corn, and string beans on long poles—the climbing variety is easier on his back, Arnie adds with a wink. And although the vegetable garden grows smaller every year ("I always need to make room for more flowers," he

says gruffly), it still produces more food than Arnie and his wife can eat. "It's fun to be able to give vegetables away in the summer, plus we like to freeze some of it to eat in the winter."

But it's the irises that capture most of Arnie's attention.

The Siouxland Iris Society, the local chapter of the American Iris Society, operates out of Sioux City and hosts an annual iris show. This year, the show was in Sioux Center, and their involvement kept Arnie and Carol busy. Carol became an official member just a few years after her husband—almost twelve years ago now, although Arnie says her interest centers more on arranging the flowers. "She's really good, too," he says, pointing at an elegant arrangement of a beautiful, yellow, *Spuria* iris sitting on the kitchen table in a blue vase.

He hopes to start judging at shows like the one held in the Centre Mall now that he's finished the training process the society mandates for its prospective judges. He keeps busy with other things too, like visiting with his four children and watching his grandkids play soccer, volleyball, or baseball. No, he doesn't feel called back to the classroom now that he's officially retired, even though, because of huge Western Civilization classes throughout his long tenure at Dordt, he probably knows the names of more alums than the Advancement Office.

It's gardening that occupies much of Arnie Koekkoek's "retired" life, and he wouldn't have it any other way. And neither would the people who like to wander through his backyard and fill their senses with its wonders.

¹ Elisabeth McPherson Eberspacher graduated from Dordt College in May 2004.