

## Hooker Nichols Full Bio

Having been raised on the family homestead at Woodward, Oklahoma, there was never a time when I wasn't surrounded by family members who possessed an intense interest in raising and growing things that would produce some type of a cash crop.

My late aunt, Theda Clark, maintained one of the largest commercial iris gardens in Northwest Oklahoma during the late 1940s and 1950s. She had a keen interest in growing all types of bearded irises and learned early on how to hybridize them.

The Clarks were able to obtain hundreds of the newly released irises during this time period. Theda traveled extensively during the bloom season exhibiting in a number of area iris shows. There was never a spring when I was not surrounded by blooming irises spread out over the six acre home garden.

If that was not enough irises to look at, I could always travel two blocks down the street to see the large gardens of irises owned by Annie Glitsch.

Both my Aunt Theda and Annie Glitsch allowed me to collect bee pods from the irises and plant the seeds when I was just a tyke. Theda showed me how to hybridize irises when I was five years old. She would always buy me a bundle of stringed price tags. I was allowed to cross until I used up all my 100 tags. Today, I would have told my Aunt, Get Real! My first crosses were made on SDB bearded irises.

We would receive car loads of visitors during bloom season when I was very young. I would show the people around the home garden and the Glitsch garden down the street. The Northwest Oklahoma Iris Society was our local iris society. We were quite fortunate to have a total of four youth members. Our annual iris shows would always have a Youth Section.

All our club members would share iris divisions with the youth members. Our iris shows would have around 500 entries even during the 1960s. The youth would help with the annual sales. We all learned from our club members to promote the American Iris Society during 4-H club meetings, as well as, when giving demonstrations at other flower society meetings on the local level.

When I turned 13, my Aunt Theda died as a result of breast cancer and my grandmother was placed in a nursing home. My mother, who was a nurse, started working double shifts, thus I was left on my own. Today, the term latch-key child would have been applied to me.

The men and ladies in our local society encouraged me to continue growing and hybridizing irises. Iris Smith, who was a personal family friend, and once directed the Round Robin Program called "Teens and Twenties" mentored me at this time too.

I learned very quickly to push a lawn mower and ended up mowing 30 lawns from the time I was ten years old until my move to Texas in 1992. This provided me with all the money I needed to buy lots of irises and have extra left over to spend on other things a normal teen-age boy found interesting.

Melba Hamblen had begun to correspond with me when I was around 13 when I had some hybridizing questions. This began a long friendship. Her letters of encouragement to continue growing and hybridizing irises is probably the reason I still grow them today.

Between the years 1967 through 1972, I kept the Northwest Oklahoma Iris Society alive and well. We still had regular club meetings and an annual iris show. I was able to bring to our town a number of well known Region 22 iris people to give programs. The autumn of 1972, off to the university I ventured. In Alva, Oklahoma, I

was able to organize the Alva Men's garden club. This group of men began sponsoring an annual iris show there in the city of Alva. Two members eventually became AIS Garden Judges with my encouragement.

My formal AIS Judges training began in 1970. Many important iris personalities gave me both exhibition and garden training during the next few years. Among these iris personalities one could find Dr. Hugo Wall, William Bledsoe, Ron Mullin, and a host of others from Regions 17, 18, and 22. There was nothing about any type of iris that could be grown in our part of the country that these kind people did not make sure that I knew frontwards and backwards.

Probably the most important thing that I learned from all these BIG iris people was that the entire exhibition and garden judging training and education would be an on-going life-long process. One had to continually up-date your personal iris collections to be able to adequately judge the modern irises.

I became an AIS Judge in 1974. Being a teacher, I found it easy to conduct judges training sessions. I have traveled throughout the country to schools on various topics. Early on, I found that always the instructor and the students learn from each other.

I take great pride in the fact that numerous people, who have held AIS Leadership positions both on national and regional levels have been my former students in Judges Training. Many times I have traveled to make sure some student in training gets the necessary hours he/she must have in order to complete their training. More than once, I have intervened to make sure that certain personality disagreements do not prevent a student from obtaining their AIS Judgeship.

I enjoy traveling to various clubs to judge iris shows. I make sure even our smallest and/or newest iris clubs are able to have an accredited show – even if they only need one judge.



Hooker and Bonnie own and maintain Hillcrest Iris Gardens in Dallas. Website: [www.Hillcrestiris.com](http://www.Hillcrestiris.com)