The Gift of the Serendipitous Cross

This article was published in two parts. Part 1, along with the beautiful full color back cover, appeared in the Spring/Summer 2010 issue of The Daylily Pioneer, Vol. 11, No. 1. Although this was not published in the 2011 competition year, it is included here as a service to our members who may desire to read the complete article.

Part 2, the Best Article About Hybridizing from the 2011 competition follows the above article.

Ken Cobb
Regional Newsletter Awards Subcommittee Chair
the gift of the serendipitous cross
North Wind Dancer's contribution to the Northern hardy daylily

By Kyle Billadeau and Gary Schaben

Serendipity (noun): a natural gift for making useful discoveries quite by accident.

When your daylily club invites a hybridizer to speak about their breeding program, chances are you'll sit in a darkened room, view many slides of stunning daylilies (photographed at their very best angles), and learn a few specifics of that hybridizer's 'goals.'

Imagine for a moment that you're a rookie hybridizer. You may have left the room thinking there is a method to this madness! All I have to do is choose two daylilies with traits I like, breed them and Voila! I will set goals, I will be focused, and the daylily of my dreams will surely emerge.

But what if, along the way, nature throws you a curveball? A seedling appears on your radar that doesn't fit into your plan. In spite of its beauty, you resist, but it's too special to ignore. And then that very special seedling becomes an introduction worthy of the Stout Medal ballot eight short years later.

Such is the serendipitous cross that became 'H. North Wind Dancer' (Schaben, 2001). Gary Schaben gives his wife Rita credit for it. The day Rita spied it, Gary was too busy to come over and see what had Rita so excited. But this was a very special bloom, so Rita trudged up the hill with her camera, and persuaded the very photogenic Dancer to stop shimmying in the breeze long enough to capture the perfect shot.

"The most exciting phrase to hear in science, the one that heralds new discoveries, is not 'Eureka!', but 'That's funny.'" – Isaac Asimov

Gary says he never did get up to see the Dancer that day. When he did see it bloom a few days later, he recalls, it wasn't a 'Wow' moment but more of a "Hmmm," as he had not considered introducing a daylily with that particular look. Although it was a special creature, his problem was that as a "newbie" hybridizer, spiders were an afterthought - he was focused on the currently popular look at that time of "big gloppy edges on polychrome bagels." But by the time the day had ended, he had gone back to look at the Dancer three or four times, and it was a 'Wow' by the time the day ended, "kind of like trying to resist an epiphany," according to Gary.

Even the cross was not really what he was originally breeding for. Gary wanted to buy some seed from Fran Harding, and his first choices were sold out - but he kept working down the list, finally settling for a cross out of H. 'Pink Windmill' (Crochet, 1997). Pollen from that seedling was dabbed onto the lovely H. 'Lola Branhani' (Burkey, 1991), and the patch of seedlings was sown. Once they happened upon the Dancer, Gary and Rita had many conversations about unusual and beautiful it was, but they worried that it was so different, it might not be widely accepted.

"Serendipity is looking for a needle in a haystack and finding the farmer's daughter." – Julius Comroe Jr.

As it turned out, Rita and Gary need not have worried. Like a viral video today, Rita's special photo traveled quickly around the world via the internet. It turned up in Europe on an Italian culture company website. It caught the attention of a tissue culture company in the Netherlands, although it was rejected for being too dormant. You see, the Dancer knew its purpose - to become a key breeder of the northern-hardy unusual form! Every so often, a daylily comes along that captures the imagination of the daylily breeder, catapulting over everything else out there shouting "Pick me! Pick me, for I'll give you the most stunning baby!" These "super breeders" become legendary, known for their consistent performance and vigor in many regions of the country. While there is no AHS award for the best breeder, (hybridizing factors are not considered when voting the Stout Medal ballot), if there were, surely the Dancer would be a competitor in that category as well.

Studying the progeny of H. North Wind Dancer

Searching the AHS online database shows 22 registrations to date with the Dancer as either pod or pollen parent (there could be more if a 'North Wind Dancer' seedling was identified only as 'sdlg' when registered). Five of those are Schaben introductions, five are from Jim Murphy of Virginia, and several other hybridizers have registered one or two.

So what traits did hybridizers breed for when they chose the Dancer as a pod or pollen parent? And what did they get?

These and related questions will be discussed in the continuation of this article in the next issue of the Pioneer. For now, take a look at the back cover of this issue for photographs of 'North Wind Dancer' and several of its kids. >>
North Wind Dancer—A Powerful Parent

The prolific breeder used around the world to create new generations of Northern hardy daylilies (story on pg. 27)

H. 'Horsepower' (Murphy-JP, 2010)
44", 7" bloom, Late, Dormant, Diploid, Ect, Fra, UF Cascade (Margo Reed Indeed x North Wind Dancer)

H. 'Sheerry's Last Bad Boyfriend' (Oakes-N., 2009) 35", bloom 7", Dormant, Diploid, 14 buds, 3 branches. (North Wind Dancer x Mighty High Fly Tighty)

H. 'Revenge' (Murphy-JP, 2009)
41", 7" bloom, Mlate, Dormant, Diploid, UF Cascade (Margo Reed Indeed x North Wind Dancer)

H. 'North Wind Dancer' (Schaben, 2001) Gary Schaben won the 2007 Minnesota State Horticultural Society's prestigious 'Bronze Award,' given for remarkable contributions in horticulture through the development of new plant(s), and was primarily for the introduction of H. 'North Wind Dancer.'

H. 'North Wind Curly Joe' (Schaben, 2006)
28", bloom 6", Mld, Dormant, Diploid, UF Cascade (North Wind Dancer x Susan Weber)

H. 'Waterdale Waltz' (Schaben, 2007)
45", bloom 7", EM, Dormant, Diploid, UF Cascade (Watchey Lavender Blue x North Wind Dancer)

H. 'North Wind Moe' (Schaben, 2006)
42", bloom 7", Mld, Dormant Dip, UF Cascade (North Wind Dancer x Susan Weber)

H. 'North Wind Billet Doux' (Schaben, 2005) 28", bloom 6", Mlate, Dormant Diploid, (Indian Giver x North Wind Dancer)

PHOTO CREATES: Top row (L to R)—Don Herr, Jim Murphy, Nancy Oakes, Jim Murphy, 'North Wind Dancer' — Kyle Billaudou. Bottom row (L to R)—Kyle Billaudou, Gary Schaben, Steve Horan, Kyle Billaudou.
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Part 2 the legacy of 'the Dancer' to the next generations

By Kyle Billadeau with collaboration from Gary Schaben, Don Lovell and Jim Murphy

Part 1 of this article was published in the Spring/Summer 2010 issue of the Pioneer.

The serendipitous discovery and award-winning traits of *H. 'North Wind Dancer'* were the subject of part 1 of this article. In part 2, we take a look at the results of breeding with 'the Dancer.' To date, there are 27 registrations with the Dancer listed as a parent, and 2 registrations that are grandkids of this Stout medal nominee.

gary Schaben isn't too surprised that almost 30 cultivars have been registered from 'North Wind Dancer' since it was introduced in 2001. After all, he has selected five introductions himself. The hybridizer with the most registrations from the Dancer is Jim Murphy of Virginia, with 6 registrations to date and more planned. Jim saw his first seedlings from the Dancer bloom in 2005. Jim says, "I immediately planted all the rest of my seeds from 'North Wind Dancer' and they bloomed en masse in 2008. I selected over 100 of those in two years, mostly from the cross "Margo Reed Indeed x North Wind Dancer.""

Jim eventually narrowed down that list of selections to 15, has registered 6 of those, and has a few probable introductions among the remaining nine. He says "My best introduction, perhaps ever, is coming out of 'Jellyfish Jealousy x North Wind Dancer.' It is very tall, well-branched, and a classic bud builder, with up to 60 buds after building." Jim's wife, Margo Reed, also has a future white introduction coming out of "Secretary Sand x 'North Wind Dancer.'"

One of the favorite features of 'North Wind Dancer' seedlings that Jim and Margo especially enjoy is the clear color. "When you look down a row of 'North Wind Dancer' seedlings, you frequently see what Margo calls 'jewel-like colors,'" says Jim. Out of all the Murphy registrations from the Dancer, Jim feels that "The clearest color out of any of them, by a mile, is 'Revenge' (Murphy, J.P., 2009)."

The parentage of 'Revenge' is 'Margo Reed Indeed' x 'North Wind Dancer,' a cross of a near-white with a clear lavender. In addition to lavender, the Dancer seedlings come in pink, purple, some near-whites, and a few yellows. According to Jim, some of the grandkids are even aquamarine, a color he will definitely pursue. 'Revenge' is sunfast, as is 'Horsepower' (Murphy, J.P., 2010), although Jim says the color of 'Horsepower' can change during the day. It has the most variable blooms of the Murphy registrations with 'North Wind Dancer' parentage, ranging from UF cascade to crispate, to quilled on cold mornings.

Don Lovell, of Marshalltown, Iowa, has literally hundreds of seedlings out of 'North Wind Dancer,' many of which are now into the next couple of generations. Two grandkids Don has registered are 'Cyclone Eyes on You' (Lovell, 2011) and 'Cyclone Whirlaway' (Lovell, 2011), both siblings in a cross of [("Peppermint Stripe' x 'North Wind Dancer') x 'Blue Venture']. Both of these have vivid eye patterns, drawing from the deepest pink tones of the Dancer.

For the blue breeder, the Dancer offers potential as well. gary bred 'North Wind Dancer' to 'Lavender Blue Baby' and says "it gave me the incredible 'Hakuna Matata' (Schaben, 2007)," a rich violet purple with blue watermark. Also exploring the path of blue using rounder forms is Don Lovell, who has "some babies out of 'Baby Blue Eyes' x 'North Wind Dancer' that are showing nice blue color, which I am excited about."

Beautiful color aside, gary Schaben feels that the main reasons for hybridizing with the Dancer are its vigor, branching, budcount - and dormancy. "'North Wind Dancer' throws dormancy and hardiness to its kids, and in turn, most of the kids will do the same thing." Jim Murphy notes that with regard to his and Margo's breeding, "All of our introductions and futures from 'North Wind Dancer' are dormant, most are hard dormant with blue-green foliage, which we do select for."

Jim adds that he also appreciates the blue-green foliage (sometimes curly), long blooming habit and bud-building characteristics of his selected 'North Wind Dancer' seedlings. Don Lovell agrees that many seedlings from 'North Wind Dancer' have moderately tall scapes,
nice branching, and blue-green foliage, all of which are desirable in his hybridizing program. Gary feels that “‘North Wind Dancer’ is packed full of secrets, for example, the lovely ruffled foliage it tends to pass on to its children. If some sharp-eyed hybridizer would exploit that one little secret trait, it could change the entire look of a daylily clump.”

Another aspect of ‘North Wind Dancer’ breeding is that it does not need to be bred to strictly unusual forms or spiders to produce unique characteristics. Gary bred the Dancer to the full-formed ‘Susan Weber’ (Branch, 1989), which gave him ‘North Wind Moe’ (Schaben, 2006). ‘North Wind Moe’ has 7” blooms, and magnificent electric pink color, on a pinched crispate. Out of the same cross came ‘North Wind Curly Joe’ (Schaben, 2006), a lovely pastel pink color on an 8” gracefully cascading curling bloom, and magnificent plant habit.

In a world where hybridizing with fancy tetraploids has eclipsed the smaller world of the diploid breeder, ‘North Wind Dancer’ has its place already in daylily history. In the 2006 AHS book Caught in the Web: Spiders and UFos, Bret Clement wrote, “Although he has not introduced many unusual forms or spiders, Gary Schaben’s ‘North Wind Dancer’ (Schaben, 2001) is already a classic. There certainly is no question regarding its hardness.” (Chapter 7, “Northern Hardy Spiders and Unusual Forms”).

We will find out later this year if that history will include a Stout Medal award. As runner-up to the Stout medal in 2009 and 2010, the Dancer has one more chance on the ballot before resting on its laurels. Reflecting back, Gary admits that his early success with the Dancer might have been viewed by some as happening before he really paid his dues. But at the time, he says, “There was nothing else quite like it. ‘North Wind Dancer’ showed that somebody with a small program could really make something unique.”

At the time of its introduction, Gary says “Hybridizers were pulling up stakes left and right, and moving south.” It was a period when, “People thought nothing good or unique could come from northern breeding.” But the Dancer proved that theory false, as it became known not only for its own merits, but also for the desirable traits it passed on to future registrations.

As evidenced by nearly 30 introductions, and more to come from ‘North Wind Dancer’ breeding, this daylily has not finished making its mark in the daylily world. Hybridizers from around the globe, some of which probably classify themselves in the ‘backyard hybridizer’ category, have now placed ‘North Wind Dancer’ permanently into the genetics of the northern hardy unusual form. Gary thinks it doesn’t end here though, saying, “I do not know for sure, but I doubt that we have discovered all of the treasures that ‘North Wind Dancer’ has to offer.”

Gary is most proud of the fact that his introduction of ‘North Wind Dancer’ could “inspire the dream of what today’s northern hybridizer can get in their own backyard.” And that perhaps is the true gift of the serendipitous cross.