



Muriel Zahm markets thousands of varieties across the world every year.

Montana Woman Catches “Iris Virus”

Muriel Zahm says she caught the “iris virus” more than 50 years ago, and she’s been infected with it ever since.

“Iris virus” is very catchy, and it’s transferrable,” says 81-year-old Zahm, the Iris Lady of Laurel, Mont. The only treatment for the iris virus, she says, is more irises. Today, she raises and sells between 800 and 1,000 varieties of primarily tall, bearded iris rhizomes. (A rhizome is the root stalk that produces the shoot and root system of the new plant.)

Zahm’s love of irises began when she ordered what she hoped would be a pink iris. The pink turned out to be a “washed-out peach,” but she soon discovered the Billings (Montana) Big Sky Iris Club, and willing club members helped her locate a perfect pink iris.

Today, people of all ages and origins visit Zahm’s garden during the late May to mid-June bloom season. From 9 a.m. to 7 p.m., visitors generally find Zahm working among her iris plants, pulling weeds, pinching wilted blossoms, or updating name tags. Visitors report that the names roll off her tongue from

memory: Honk Your Horn, Navajo Blanket, Vigilante, Starwoman, King Tush, In the Buff, Velvet Elvis, Dracula’s Kiss.

More than 1,000 varieties are pictured individually, in full color, on her website. Zahm’s irises can be purchased on-site during the growing season and at farmers markets. In July Zahm and her helpers divide plants and fill and ship orders.

One of Zahm’s customers bought his first iris from Zahm in the 1990’s and, over the years, clearly became infected with the iris virus. Delane Langton’s garden today contains more than 6,000 varieties of iris, and he continues to create hybrids.

Zahm’s irises will gain national notoriety in 2025 when the Big Sky Iris Club hosts the American Iris Society annual national conference June 3-7. Zahm’s and Langton’s iris gardens are featured tour destinations on the convention’s tour schedule.

Contact: FARM SHOW Followup, Muriel Zahm, 1525 E. Maryland Ln., Laurel, Mont. 59044 (ph 406-628-3048; <https://muriels.irisgarden.us/index.php/>).



With two lithium batteries that fully charge in 4 to 6 hrs., running time is about 2 hrs. and 20 miles, depending on the terrain.

Zoom Chair Offers Long, Stable Ride

Explore hiking trails, hang out at the beach or chase cattle on your ranch with Zoom, a power-driven mobility device that travels up to 13 mph. Each wheel has its own motor, and the design is all about traveling off the beaten path.

“One of the wheels is in front of the other, and the wheels are tilted for stability. It’s all about balance and so it doesn’t tip over,” says Kim McCabe, the U.S. distributor for the Swedish-made Zoom. “And it’s a lot faster and goes farther. It looks more like a fun, sporty bike chair.”

About 3 years ago, she added it to her business, McCabe Outdoor Mobility, which she started after her husband was paralyzed from an accident.

“My husband is an extreme outdoor person,” she says, “and the Zoom chair allows him to stay active - exploring, hunting and fishing.”

With two lithium batteries that fully charge in 4 to 6 hrs., running time is about 2 hrs. and 20 miles, depending on the terrain. A new battery promises to last about 60 miles, McCabe adds. The seat swivels and flexes and is similar to a race car seat. An additional liner offers padding for pressure sores. The 18-in. wheels have treads like a mountain bike tire, yet they’re suitable for going into businesses or restaurants. But they’re not as

maneuverable as wheelchairs designed for everyday home use.

“You do have to have upper body strength to drive these,” she emphasizes, to get in and out of it and to operate the twist or thumb-operated throttle and brake.

McCabe has delivered them to be used in parks and to individuals.

“They can go from 0 to 13 mph in seconds. The biggest thing you notice is they try it, and they have a huge smile on their face. It changes their life; they don’t have to sit on the sidelines,” she says, adding the speed can be geared down to 3 or 6.3 mph.

Zoom was designed by a Swedish development engineer for an active woman with MS. Very popular in Europe, some are geared up to race at 20 mph.

“I have dealers in 10 states and want one in every state by the end of 2024, so they can deliver them in person, teach and help maintain them,” McCabe says, adding that often customers make the best dealers.

Contact her for more information about being a dealer or to purchase a Zoom (about \$15,000).

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Hydraulic Nutcracker Gets Job Done

Tired of bruised fingers cracking black walnuts with a hammer, John Martin found a gentler way. He built a hydraulic nutcracker using scrap steel, wood, and a hydraulic jack from Harbor Freight.

“I love black walnuts, but the shells are hard to crack,” says Martin. “With my nutcracker, it’s easy. I pump the handle on the jack a few times until the nut cracks. Then, I release the pressure on the jack piston and pull out the cracked nut. It takes 20 to 30 seconds per nut.”

Martin started with square tubing from an old exercise machine. He took advantage of fittings on the tubing to assemble a U-shaped framework with 12-in. sides using bolts.

“If I ever need to, I can take it apart by removing one bolt on each side,” says Martin.

He welded a crossbar to the U, making the frame just 2 1/2 in. taller than the jack piston. He then welded the base of the frame to the centers of two 12-in. long, 1 1/2-in. angle irons. The angle irons provided a base to attach 12-in. long 2 by 6-in. boards. He drilled holes in the base of the jack so he could fasten it to the boards with screws.

“I hammered a large washer into a dish shape and welded it to the underside of the top crossbar to catch the nut,” explains Martin. “To hold the nut on top of the jack



Martin’s walnut jack makes cracking black walnuts a clean and easy process.

post, I cut a 1/4-in. slice of pipe and welded it to the top of the screw adjustment on the piston of the jack.”

To speed the downward movement of the piston when the hydraulic pressure is

released, Martin fabricated a yoke for the top of the piston. He cut a slot out of a piece of bed frame angle iron and slipped it over the threads of the adjusting screw to rest on the piston of the jack.

“I welded two pieces of scrap to the bottom corners of the frame and drilled holes in them to attach springs which hook onto the yoke,” says Martin. “When I release the hydraulic pressure on the piston, the springs pull it down so I can remove and replace the cracked nut.”

After having the shell fragments sting his finger when cracking nuts, Martin added a piece of rubber baseboard to either side of the nut holder.

“I screwed them to the yoke, so they make a flexible pocket for holding the nut,” says Martin.

Martin made it easy to adjust the release valve on the jack. He cut a slot in a short length of pipe that fits over the valve and glued the pipe to the valve using JB weld. He then drilled a hole in the end of the pipe and inserted a small bolt through it, securing it with a nut on either side of the pipe. He also made a 2-ft. extension to the jack handle.

“I set the entire nutcracker in an old oil drip pan that I had cleaned up and set it on the workbench,” says Martin. “Any piece of nut or nutshell that flies off falls in the pan. There are no nutshells to sweep up. When I’m



Close-up of jack piston used to crack black walnuts.

all done, I take the pan outside and dump it far from the house and let the squirrels search for walnut crumbs.”

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