

# Nursery owner creates special iris to celebrate Olivia Newton-John



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Thomas Johnson (left) cross-pollinated the seed for the new Iris in the garden of Barry and Lesley Blyth, who live only miles from where Olivia Newton-John grew up. PHOTO COURTESY OF THOMAS JOHNSON

*“Let me take you through that wonderland*

*That only two can share  
All I ask you is let me be there”*

**W**hen Thomas Johnson was 8, his mother gave him the record “Let Me Be There” by Olivia Newton-John. Even at that young age, the song, the music, and the lyrics all seemed to click for him, and he quickly became a fan of the singer, whom he had never heard of. It would probably be accurate to say that from that early age, Thomas became hooked on Olivia Newton-John.

Oregon is well known for being an ideal climate for growing bearded iris

and Thomas Johnson is the owner of the bearded iris company, Mid-America Garden in Salem, Oregon. However, he is probably better known to local gardeners as the co-owner of Sebright Gardens. He and Kirk Hansen own and operate the well-known hosta nursery in Salem, which has the superb display garden that is open to the public.

As Thomas grew up, he never lost his fondness for Olivia Newton-John. As he followed her through life, he was saddened when it was announced that she had breast cancer. The cancer was first diagnosed in 1992, and she battled with metastatic breast cancer for 30 years. In 2022 she finally succumbed to the dreaded



Thomas Johnson had always been a fan of Olivia Newton-John and when she passed away from cancer, he felt the urge to do something positive to honor her memory and named the above iris after her. PHOTO BY THOMAS JOHNSON

disease. Cancer was also no stranger to Thomas; he lost three of four grandparents to colon cancer.

Thomas felt the urge to do something positive in her memory to honor her. Being an iris breeder, Thomas decided the best thing that he could do would be to create an iris named after her. Little did he know the hoops that he would have to go through just to get the rights to use her name. But he persevered and was able to contact a maternal aunt of Olivia Newton-John, Tottie Goldsmith, who, after contacting others, was able to give Thomas the go-ahead to breed a namesake iris for the singer.

As a well-known iris breeder with many of his bearded irises on the retail market, he had only named two of them for people. The first, *Iris* ‘Barbara Rider’, was named for his grandmother, and the second, *Iris* ‘Paul Black’, was named



## What I'm Hearing

for his iris mentor. The process of naming an iris for a person, in this case a well-known deceased celebrity, was obviously quite a different challenge. Thomas wanted to create a new iris that would be unique, have a stunning flower and convey his admiration and respect for this special lady.

Growing a quality iris from seed is not a fast-moving process. There is always the chance that the resulting flower may not be worthy. In this instance, seed to flower was 10 years. The seed for this iris was hand pollinated in Australia. Thomas commented, "I made the cross in the garden of Barry and Lesley Blyth, who live only miles from where Olivia grew up, using two of Barry's seedlings."

Now, Thomas had the flower, it met his expectations and was an iris that he would be proud to introduce. The next hurdle was to select a name, and this was

a difficult challenge. Should the name be from a motion picture that Olivia starred in, should it be from one of her songs, or should it just be called Olivia Newton-John?

After much discussion, the name Lovely Livvy was chosen. That was the pet name that the media often used throughout Olivia's life to describe her. Thomas wrote, "It is pink, the color of breast cancer awareness. It is an extraordinary and unique creation in a color combination that has not yet been seen in iris until now. The standards are white flushed with pink. The falls are a deeper rose pink with a gorgeous ruffled white band."

Later this year, Thomas will be flying to Australia along with a photograph of *Iris* 'Lovely Livvy'. There will be a ceremony and dedication of the photograph and the iris and the photograph will be hung in the Olivia Newton-John

Cancer Wellness and Research Center in the hospital in Heidelberg, a suburb of Melbourne, Australia.

One of Thomas' biggest regrets is that he never had the opportunity to see Olivia perform in concert. Today, Thomas would not call himself a "crazy fan" of Olivia Newton-John, but he liked her music. The more he learned about her as a person, cemented his thoughts that she was a very kind and decent human being.

'Lovely Livvy' has been a very popular iris for Mid-America Garden. Thomas writes, "Olivia, we tip our hats to you in gratitude for your kindness, compassion, humility, and all you did to help others. Thank you for setting the example." A portion of the sales from each rhizome sold will be donated to the Olivia Newton-John Cancer and Wellness Research Center that she created in Melbourne, Australia. ©



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