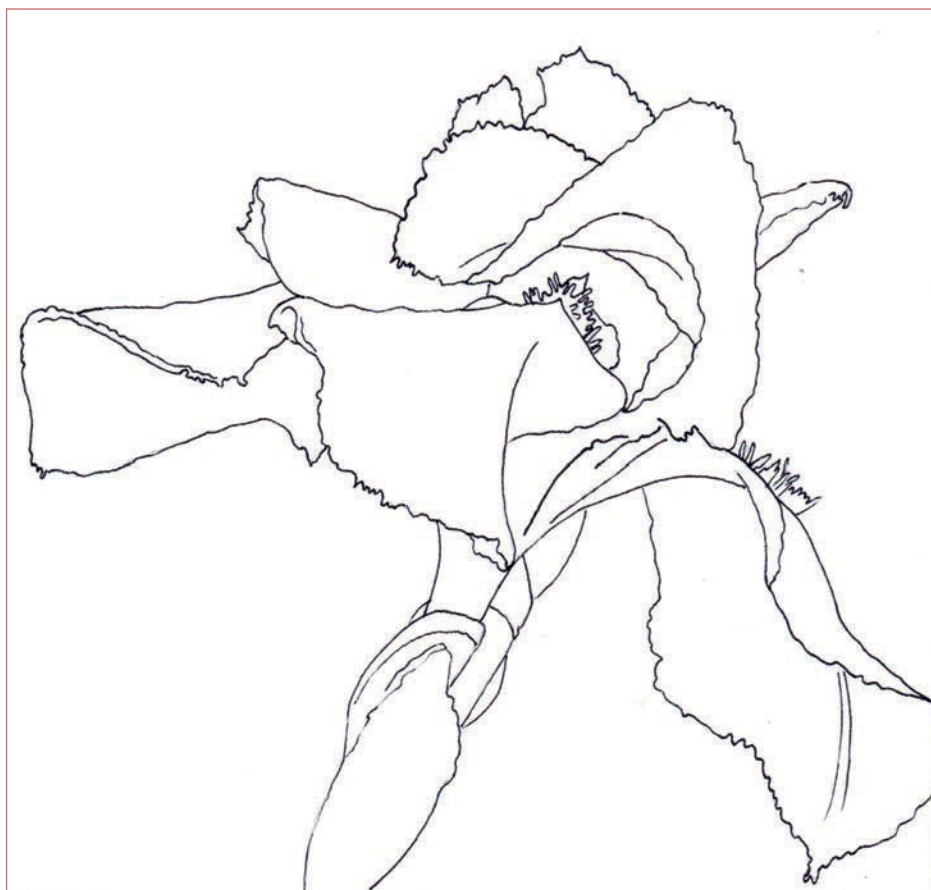


Painting project part 1

Get ready for spring as Helen Campbell introduces the subject of this month's painting project from a photograph – a stunning bearded iris



▲ Either work directly from the photograph (right), or use the outline (above) to help you draw the subject accurately. Don't forget to draw lightly if you're completing this project using watercolour.

Botanical art is becoming increasingly popular, yet so many artists still feel nervous about trying it for themselves. It is a pity, given the wonderful array of flowers and fruit that we have growing in abundance around us. With so many plants to choose from, it is a shame that we are put off so easily. Perhaps this is due to the complexity of the plants themselves, or because watercolour can be difficult to work with. I aim to take the mystery out of it here, making it a relaxing, enjoyable process that is relatively easy to follow.

The subject

I adore this gorgeous, blousy iris (above right) that I found growing in my garden last year. The desire to paint it was just too hard to resist! It seems to be translucent, posing in the natural daylight, showing off its wonderful shape and form. It also has a real contemporary feel to it, which brings it bang up-to-date.

Once I had an idea of how I wanted my composition to look, I began by taking a series of reference photographs with a digital camera, making sure that I recorded all of the various elements of the bloom should I need to refer to them when completing the painting.

In this instance I photographed the iris just as I saw it growing in my garden. It was the perfect subject, as it seemed to assist with composition, giving me its natural pose. However, photographing plants in their natural environment does have its drawbacks. When viewing the final selected photograph of the iris, I found the colours in the background were very distracting. I therefore removed them using Photoshop, which is photo-editing software; this made assessing the colours so much easier. If you are unable to do this, you can achieve a similar effect by photographing the plant *in situ* by placing white card behind it.

You will need

■ Surface

- Fabriano Artistic hot-pressed paper 5½x5in. (14x13cm)

■ Watercolour

- Cobalt blue violet (Daniel Smith)
- Bright violet (Holbein)
- Permanent rose (Winsor & Newton)
- Raw umber (Winsor & Newton)
- Leaf green (Holbein)
- Cadmium green (Winsor & Newton)
- Payne's grey (Winsor & Newton)

■ Miscellaneous

- No. 3 sable spotter brush
- .03 mechanical pencil

It's all in the detail

I purposely used a limited palette for this project, proving you do not need to purchase a lot of unnecessary colours. You will see how easy it is to achieve both depth of colour and form by simply adding more pigment or more water as necessary. And I only used one brush throughout the project – a No. 3 sable spotter from Rosemary & Co (www.rosemaryandco.com), which has a very fine point. It is therefore not necessary to purchase smaller brushes, even for the very fine veins, as this does the job beautifully.

It is vital when painting botanically that you look really carefully at your subject, because it isn't always apparent at first glance what is there. The darker areas can also be a challenge. The tendency is to apply the pigment dry in an attempt to create darker tones, but potentially this can cause problems, not least by making it rather difficult to apply and, of course, it could give your painting a muddy look. It is therefore much better to have enough water in your mix to make sure that it is easy to apply. If you add too much water, simply keep adding more pigment until it is strong enough but still wet.

While it is not really important to know the parts of the plant that you are painting, it may help to have a little knowledge. The bearded iris comprises standards, the upper, ruffled broad petals that stand erect, and falls, the lower petals that droop backward.

I placed a simple outline around the flower; this is to assist with the drawing. You will find it easier when drawing if



▲ This month's subject from a photograph: a bearded iris

you look at both the positive shape (the shape of the iris itself) and the negative space (the space between the iris and the box outline). It is vital that you pay close attention to the little undulations at the tip of each petal, noting how they seem to dip in and out like small waves. I have also provided a simple line drawing (above left) should you want to trace it.

Painting the subject


My first washes are always weak and watery and always need adjusting both in terms of colour and tone. I call these first washes my template, as they will guide me later when it is time to build up the colour. It is very important that you allow each wash to dry completely before attempting the next otherwise the colours will run into each other or smudge and become muddy. Because colour is relative, often as I work on a project I need to adjust some of the colours after I have applied subsequent colours. This

is particularly so on the iris where the overall colour appears to be light purple, but on closer inspection you will see that there is a lot of blue on the standards – the petals that go up – and more of a pink tone on the falls – the part of the petals that drop down.

While working on the project, and particularly if you are new to watercolour, you may find that the paint dries before you cover the area that you are working on. This will cause an overlay or hard edge, which is one of the most common reasons people avoid using watercolour. However, it is a very easy problem to overcome – simply by picking up the same wash that you have already applied, and going over the dry paint, the hard edge will magically disappear.

The main difficulty with the iris project is noting how the colours constantly seem to change. The tips of the petals are light, yet the inside colours are much

stronger. It is also worth noting that in some areas, the colour is not right up to the edge, and it is important that you keep these gaps to add to the sense of realism. Of course, we will all see it slightly differently, but I think this all adds to the realism and joy of painting such a gorgeous bloom.

I'll show you next month how I painted this iris in watercolour. 

Show your work

We would love to see your finished painting on the LP project area of painters-online.co.uk. Simply email a jpg of the image to dawn@tapc.co.uk along with a few lines about how you painted the subject. Find out more about Helen Campbell, her paintings and workshops at www.helencampbellart.co.uk