

The ABC's of Growing Iris

Irises are popular additions to the home landscape. Many of us think of iris as an old-fashioned flower--chances are we can remember them growing in a family garden or along a walk or driveway. Their beautiful flowers--albeit short-lived--offer a wide array of colors and combinations. Another plus, they are relatively easy to grow and are considered by many to be low-maintenance. Many gardeners will swap "fans" with other gardeners, thereby increasing their own collections of iris.

A visit to a local garden center should provide you with endless choices. If you have a favorite color, chances are there's an iris variety to match! Web site and mail-order catalogs are another source for buying iris. An important point: Always buy quality plants. To settle for less could spell trouble further down the garden path.

Helpful hint: Ask about bloom times (early, mid, or late season) for the plants you are interested in. With a little careful planning, you can enjoy iris over a longer period of time. Another consideration when selecting iris, make sure that they are hardy in your area.

Here are the basics to growing bearded and beardless irises in your garden.

Soil and Site

The culture (or growing) of iris is relatively simple compared to many other garden plants. They all require a sunny location, particularly the bearded types. For the German iris (bearded), any good garden soil is suitable, provided it is well drained. The Japanese iris (beardless) thrives on moist, rich soils and may be planted with success around ponds. It will, however, do well in other situations if the soil is fertile and abundant moisture is supplied. The Siberian iris (beardless) is hardier than either of the others both in withstanding severe climatic conditions and the competition of other plants.

Plants

Rhizomes of the bearded iris normally lie at the surface of the soil, half embedded in the earth. When planting, the top half of the

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Glossary

Rhizome: The fleshy stem of a plant found growing below the soil or at soil level.

Fan: The arrangement of leaves of iris.

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rhizomes should be exposed with soil packed solidly around them.

To keep bearded iris in good blooming condition, it is desirable to divide the clumps every third or fourth year. A fan set in July may send up flower stalks the following year. The clumps will increase the second year and be at their best the third year. In the fourth and fifth years, the fans compete with one another. Thin by removing the weaker plants so that they are spaced several inches apart.

Another option includes digging up the clump, dividing it, and resetting the rhizomes. Usually, it is necessary to dig up the clump, divide and reset it because of infestation with grass and weeds. If in overhauling the Iris bed you want to establish new flowering clumps rapidly, three or four of the fans may be set together to form a clump. In setting such clumps, the leafy end of the rhizomes should be set pointing outward from the center of the new clump.

Japanese and Siberian iris do not require frequent division. Clumps of Siberian iris remain in good condition for a dozen years or more. Sooner or later, the size and quality of the blossoms may deteriorate.

They may become infested with borers or overgrown with grass and will benefit by division and replanting.

Fertilization and Maintenance

Bearded Iris

Bearded iris will grow in relatively poor soil. With poor soil, plants will benefit from the use of a good garden fertilizer, such as 5-10-5 or 5-10-10, carefully worked into the soil around the plants in early spring or just after they have bloomed. (Be careful when doing this; avoid injury to the rhizome.)

A small handful (1/3 cup) to a clump spread on the surface of the ground several inches from the base of the plant and carefully mixed with the soil is satisfactory. A soil test can be done to determine existing nutrient and pH levels. Follow any recommendations given to improve existing soil conditions. Be sure to list the crop(s) to be grown when having a soil test done. This way, recommendations are made for the specific crop(s) and not generalized.



Iris leaves are arranged in fans.



The rhizome is exposed slightly above the soil surface.

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Weeds should be controlled by clean cultivation and pulling from amid the rhizomes. Various kinds of grass are the most troublesome because they grow between the rhizomes and are difficult to remove. It's always an advantage to have the plants free from grass, weeds or other crowding vegetation so the foliage and the rhizomes will not remain moist over long periods of time and favor the spread of fungus disease. Borer infestation is also favored by weedy plantings.

An important practice in the culture of the bearded iris is sanitation: Clean up and discard all dead foliage, preferably in the fall. Foliage can carry disease spores and insect eggs.

Winter protection in most areas is not needed; only climates that experience severe winter conditions should mulch. A loose mulch of coarse straw or evergreen boughs may be advantageous, provided it does not mat down on the rhizomes and keep them wet. Mulches afford cover for mice that may destroy the rhizomes. Mulch may be advisable if the iris plants have been planted in the fall and are not yet well rooted.

Japanese Iris

Japanese iris thrive under moist conditions and responds to more liberal applications of fertilizer. Either well-rotted manure or a commercial 5-10-5 fertilizer is valuable when placed around the plants in early spring and carefully mixed with the soil. Compost is useful in soils that lack organic material. If dry weather precedes bloom in June, watering is advisable. Cultivation is essential to keep down weeds although the danger of disease is apparently not as important as with the bearded iris. The growth of the Japanese iris clumps is relatively slow, but they should be divided occasionally as they become crowded.

Siberian Iris

Siberian irises are perhaps the easiest to grow of all. Once established, they persist in spite of competition

from weeds and grass. They do, however, respond to good garden culture; clumps that become over-sized should be divided and reset.

Propagation of Irises

Irises, except the bulbous types, are propagated by simple division of the rhizomes. The divisions of the bearded iris are called "fans." A fan is a cluster of leaves with a two to three inch-long section of the rhizome attached. The plants are usually divided a month or two after they have bloomed. With a sharp spade, the individual fans may be dug and separated or the clump may be cut into sections of several fans. It is good practice to cut off one-half or two-thirds of the leaf surface at the time of transplanting, unless a clump



Bearded iris are identified by the 'beard' found on petals.

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is moved with a ball of earth. Divisions set in early summer form roots and new growth before winter.

Dividing Bearded Iris

Here's the ABC's of dividing bearded iris:

1. Bearded irises need to be divided every four or five years to keep their vigor. A month or two after the flowers fade, gently pry the entire clump out of the ground with a spading fork.
2. After washing the soil from the roots, trim the healthy leaves to a length of four to six inches; remove any shriveled leaves and dead flower stalks. If plants show any signs of iris borers or disease, discard the stalks and leaves; do not compost them!
3. With a knife, cut off the fleshy outer roots so that you get V-shaped pieces, each with two fans of leaves. Discard the old center root. If pieces contain borers, cut out and throw away.
4. Plant each section in prepared soil. Make sure that the rhizome is not completely buried; the top of the rhizome should be above the soil with the soil firmly packed around it.

Japanese and Siberian iris prefer to be divided in early spring, before growth starts. Later divisions during the spring and early summer can be made, but plants are more difficult to establish. Fall division, in colder climates, is not satisfactory because of the danger of the plants heaving out of the ground during the winter. The clumps are dug up and cut into divisions with a heavy knife or sharp spade. Each division should have several tufts of leaves and as many roots as can be left attached in the cutting process.

The Bulbous Iris

Bulbous irises are most adapted to a climate with hot, dry summers and mild winters. Of its many species, only a few are satisfactory for growing in the northern states, and these are not well known to gardeners. In the very early spring, the dark purple flowers of *Iris reticulata* are attractive in the garden. Another hardy, early blooming species is the sky blue *Iris histriodes*. The later-blooming Spanish iris, *Iris xiphium*, is more showy and a good garden subject. The English iris, *Iris xiphioides*, is larger, later, and comes in a variety of attractive colors.

The above-named bulbous irises are easy to grow in well-drained soils in the open. Under good conditions, they should be planted from 3 to 4 inches deep, and spaced six inches apart. The bulbs multiply naturally by division and may be dug and separated every three to five years or as needed.

Iris Problems

Integrated Pest Management (IPM) Considerations

IPM is a common sense approach to pest control and plant care. It uses a number of measures to prevent, control or reduce plant problems. These include: use of resistant plant varieties, proper plant selection and placement, good aftercare, use of biological or mechanical controls. Pesticides are typically used as a last resort; although an important tool in the IPM tool kit. When selecting a pesticide, consider the following points: pick one that is least toxic, consider humans, pets and natural predators. Make the application when it will be most effective in preventing, controlling or reducing the problem, as the saying goes, "timing is everything."

Accurate diagnosis of a problem is key when determining control measures to employ. Bring a

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representative sample of the problem to your local Cooperative Extension office or garden center for diagnosis and recommendation. Pesticide laws vary from state to state; seek the advice of a professional always.

Although irises are easy to maintain and relatively free from pests and most diseases, they do have problems with leaf spot diseases, bacterial soft rot, and borers.

Insects

Iris Borers

Iris Borers are the most destructive pest of iris. They winter in the egg stage on old iris leaves and debris, particularly at the base. They make pinpoint holes as they enter; continuing to gnaw out soft leaf tissue between leaf surfaces. They work their way slowly down toward the rhizomes, leaving a water-soaked and ragged appearance to the leaf fans. While in the leaves, the larvae are slender and about 1 inch long. After they reach the rhizomes, usually in early summer, they become fat 1 1/2-to-2 inches long, flesh-colored to pink with chestnut-brown heads.

After eating out the interior of the rhizomes, the borer pupates in the soil. The moths have dark purplish fore wings and yellow-brown hind wings. They appear in late summer to early fall, flying only at night. The female moth lays her eggs and the cycle starts all over again. Iris borers often deliver a second punch; they not only damage the plants with their chewing but carry the bacteria that produce foul-smelling soft rot. (See description for soft rot in this pocket Garden Guide.)

Control

Iris Borer can be partially controlled by cleaning up all plant debris in the fall. Clear iris beds of old leaves and stems, where borers lay their eggs in the fall.

Bearded iris is especially vulnerable to iris borer attacks.

Diseases

Fungal Leaf Spot

Leaf spot is the most common and widely distributed disease affecting bearded iris. Leaf spot does not kill the affected plants, but through repeated serious attacks may reduce growth and vigor. Leaf spot is recognized by the more-or-less circular or oval spots, one-eighth to one-quarter inch in diameter, on the leaves. First evident as yellowish flecks, in time the spots become tan to brown with a distinct reddish border. With some iris varieties, the leaves die back when only a few spots are present. With other varieties, the leaves may become covered with spots before they die back. Either way, the result is an unsightly plant.

The fungus *Didymellina macrospora* causes fungal leaf spot. It's very specific, attacking only iris and a few iris relatives. An important characteristic of the fungus is that its spores germinate and cause infection only if the iris leaves are wet. Overhead sprinkling or splashing raindrops may spread the spores from diseased to healthy plants.

Fungal Leaf Spot Control

Control of leaf spot involves elimination of the fungal pathogen. If all dead infected leaves are carefully collected and all infected living leaves cut off below the lowest infection and discarded. This should eliminate the source of infection to renew the disease cycle in the spring. Sanitation is key. To avoid wetting the foliage, consider irrigating at ground level; a drip system can also be employed.

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