

Wenke Wisdom

Iris

Iris can be planted almost any season, but best results are obtained if planted from mid-July through early-September. They are semi-dormant during this time period and the newly set rhizomes can become established before winter. These hardy plants have been a favorite of gardeners for years. Irises can be found in nearly every possible color; there are also bi-colored cultivars, as well as ones with petals edged in contrasting colors. The bloom time for iris will vary from mid to late spring. They range in height from 16 inches to over 3 feet.

Bearded Iris is easily grown. They prefer a moderate fertile, moist, well-drained soil. They do not grow well in soggy soil. If the soil is too heavy for good drainage, loosen it with some sand or organic matter worked deeply in the soil. Most average soils will raise excellent iris if the planting bed is raised enough to provide the necessary drainage. If fertilizer or organic matter is added, be sure it does not come in contact with the roots of the newly set plants. When planting new rhizomes, remember to plant them about 1 inch deep in full sun (at least a half day) so the tops of the rhizomes are exposed so they can bask in the sun. They will grow in partial shade, but sunshine is one of the best guarantees of healthy, disease-free new growth. A common mistake is to plant iris too deep. When planting, the roots should be spread out facing downward in the soil. Plant between 18–24" apart. It is best to plant them in groups of three, with the fans pointing in the direction you would like them to grow. (If a quick color effect is desired, plant 3 of each kind in a triangle about 6 to 8" apart, with 24" between the groups. Planting them this close will require earlier resetting to prevent overcrowding. At a distance of 18 – 24", resetting to correct overcrowding normally can be done every 3 to 4 years. Resetting at this interval will also help in control of borer and other diseases. In dry weather water the newly set plants well.

When shopping for new iris, watch the bloom times. By doing this, you can enjoy your iris from the first of their season until the last possible bloom time. Also, there are other varieties of iris you may want to add to your garden. Miniatures, which are planted in August or September, are very nice bloomers. The Japanese and Dutch iris can withstand some shade. The Dutch iris is favored by florists as a cut flower.

- **Dividing**

About every 3 or 4 years or sooner, if plants become overcrowded, it's beneficial for maximum bloom to dig and reset the bed. Three weeks after blossoming, with a fork dig all the old plants, shake or wash clean, and break or cut out the old parts and any damaged or diseased parts and discard, keeping only the new, vigorous fans. Examine the plants carefully and remove any iris borer that may be present in the leaves or rhizomes. Lay in the sun a couple of days to dry. Re-work the soil thoroughly and reset. Cut back the leaves of the new plants to a fan shape 6 to 8 inches long and burn or dispose of all waste. Each fall and spring remove all dead leaves and diseased parts and burn them. Keep the soil cultivated lightly. Instead of digging up old clumps, they can be thinned out by removing the old divisions at the centers of the clumps and leaving new growth in the ground.

- **Mulching**

In the north mulching plants the first winter with clean straw or marsh hay is recommended to prevent heaving. If a mulch is used over winter, be sure to remove it early in the spring to allow sunlight to reach the fleshy rhizomes.

- **Fertilizer**

Iris are not heavy feeders, so go easy on the fertilizer, especially animal fertilizers. Too much nitrogen or organic matter can encourage development of rot and reduce blossom production. One cup of bone meal, 6-10-10 or superphosphate per plant, worked into the soil around the plant in early spring, is sufficient in all but the poorest soils.

- **Iris Borer**

The worst iris pest is the iris borer. Eggs are laid by moths in late fall around the base of the plant. Early in spring the eggs hatch and the small larvae start eating their way into the leaves. This is the only time that a spray is effective for control. Early signs of borers are ragged leaf edges and small holes in the leaves that are surrounded by moisture. Pinching the leaves or removing the tops just below the holes at this time can kill the borer. The worms get larger as they eat downward in the leaves and usually by August have eaten into the rhizome. About this time, they eat out and pupate in the soil around the plants. This is why thoroughly working the soil at resetting is essential. Control by chemical sprays is difficult because the borer is inside. Detection and removal of the larvae is most effective as well as periodic resetting. Wounds made by the borer may also allow the start of soft rot.

- **Soft Rot**

Soft rot is a bacterial disease that is recognized by a soft creamy ooze and a very foul odor. It gains entrance through wounds and causes leaves to wilt and die. Usually the leaves rot off at their base and the rhizomes rot and are completely destroyed. Remove all diseased parts as soon as noticed. This disease is most often found in wet or poorly drained soils and in shady areas.

- **Leaf Spot**

Leaf spot causes brown spots on the leaves, and in some cases will cause leaves to wither and die. While it is unsightly it is seldom serious. Remove and burn all infected leaves. Removing dead leaves in the fall and spring is most

- **General Garden Care**

Keep your iris beds clean and free of weeds and debris, allowing the tops of the rhizomes to bask in the sun. Bloom stems should be cut off close to the ground after blooming. Healthy green leaves should be left undisturbed, but diseased or brown leaves should be removed.

- **Watering**

Newly set plants need moisture to help their root systems become established. Specific watering information depends on your climate and your soil, but keep in mind that deep watering at long intervals is better than more frequent shallow waterings. Once established, iris normally don't need to be watered except in arid areas or during a drought. Over watering is a common error.

Dwarf Iris

Dwarf iris belong to the same family as the tall bearded varieties and are affected by the same pests and treatments. However, they should be set much closer together for a showy border, mass planting or in rock gardens.