

Garden Center Guides



Iris

Iris are centuries old and still popular in gardens. There are many varieties, distinguished by flower appearance and growing habit.

Bearded Iris

This species of iris is known for growing in tough conditions. For two weeks in mid-May it produces glorious, fragrant flowers in an array of colors. The flowers of the bearded iris are born on strong vertical stems, usually with several blooms per stem. The flower has six segments. The inner three, called standards, are erect and arching. The outer three are the falls, which arch downward. The beard is the furry strip that runs down the center of the fall, hence the name bearded iris. Newer varieties of this iris have broader, flared falls with edges that are ruffled or laced.

Bearded irises are the largest of the iris varieties, growing to 3 feet. Dwarf varieties have the same flower appearance and bloom earlier than the taller varieties, some reaching only 6 to 8 inches.

Care

Iris prefers a sunny location with moderate fertility. Iris grows well in drier conditions with the rhizome partially exposed to sun and air. A yearly spring application of general minerals with a 6-10-10 formulation works well. Another application approximately one month after the iris flowers is recommended.

Iris should be planted or moved in late July through mid-August. If the foliage has not been trimmed, cut the foliage back at least halfway to prevent moisture loss while the plants get established. Dig the iris with a potato fork, being

careful not to damage the rhizome. With a sterile knife, cut the rhizome vertically. Each division should be approximately 2 inches long with 2 to 3 fans. Dig a shallow hole mounded in the middle and spread the roots around the mound. Set the plant with fans facing the outside of the garden to make room for expanded growth. Fill the hole with soil, being careful to leave rhizomes partially exposed, and water well. Water the newly planted iris regularly if weather is hot and dry, but avoid overwatering. Dead heading spent blooms will promote lateral flowering and extend the bloom period.

Common Concerns

The main pest of iris is the iris bore – the larvae of a small moth that eats the edges of the leaves during May and June, leaving them ragged. Larvae move to the base of the iris and tunnel into the flesh of the rhizome, eating out the inside, leaving only the shell of the rhizome. The iris bore larva has a brown head and a whitish pink dorsal. Pinholes made at the base of the plant indicate where eggs have been laid.

The best prevention for iris bore is to remove and destroy debris and dead foliage from the iris to prevent the eggs from hatching in the garden. Running your finger or a wire down the tunnel of the rhizome will allow the larvae to be pinched out or destroyed.

Aquatic and Wetland Iris

Siberian, Yellow Flag, Japanese and Louisiana iris add exotic flowers to bog areas or water gardens. The Siberian bloom first in mid to late spring followed by Japanese and Louisiana iris.

The Louisiana iris is a great bog plant that also does well in the garden with a little additional watering. These irises tend to sprawl with vigorous rhizomes. Most hybrids are

3 to 5 feet tall with open, narrow petals going in all directions. This group comes in a wide range of colors and will spread by seed as well as from the rhizome.

The Siberian, Yellow Flag and Japanese iris are part of a group called *Laevigatae*. These plants remain in clumps. All but the Japanese iris are water lovers, which flourish better on pond banks or edges.

Care

Division is the best means of propagation, and irises can be divided in early spring. Cut the tubers into individual fans and plant just below the soil line with the growing tips pointed upward.

If iris is to be used as an aquatic plant, pot in a gallon container and press fertilizer tabs into the mud. Set the iris in water 3 to 4 inches below the water surface.

Common Concerns

Bores are a pest on water iris as well as bearded types. Submerged iris will not be affected, but those used as bog plants may be more susceptible.

Grow iris in full to partial sun. Even after the blooms of the iris fade, the stately sword-blade foliage is attractive in the garden or pool area. Cut the foliage back halfway in late August and enjoy carefree iris for years to come.

Emily Nolting, Ph.D.

Commercial Horticulture Specialist

K-State Research and Extension

enolting@oznet.ksu.edu