

BEARDED IRIS FOR THE HOME LANDSCAPE

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Bearded iris, *Iris germanica*, is a hardy, long-lived perennial that require a minimum of maintenance. The flowers have six petals; three upright petals (called standards) and three hanging petals (called falls). A fuzzy line or beard runs down the middle of each fall. Flowers come in many colors including blue, pink, purple, reddish, white, yellow, and bi-colors. Most bearded iris flower in the spring (April to June depending on cultivar), but some of the new cultivars reflower in the summer and fall. The second flower display is not as showy as the spring display but last into the fall. Many reblooming iris are fragrant.

Bearded irises are classified into several types: miniature dwarf (height 8 inch or less, 1 to 2 inch diameter flowers), standard dwarf (height 8 to 15 inches), intermediate (height 16 to 27 inches), miniature tall (height 16 to 25 inches, small flowers), border (height 16 to 27 inches), and tall (height 28 to 38 inches). The shorter iris flower first, followed by the intermediate, and then the taller irises.

Cultivars

There are thousands of bearded iris cultivars to choose from. Some of the best performing cultivars are listed below. Spring-flowering cultivars

Miniature dwarf iris	Bantam (ruffled deep red- purple), Scribe (white with blue edging), Zipper (golden yellow with blue beards)
Standard dwarf iris	Bay Ruffles (ruffled light blue), Software (pinkish cream edged in apricot), Starlight Waltz (ruffled cream), Violet Lulu (soft violet), Watercolor (yellow standards with brown falls)
Intermediate iris	Baby Blue Marine (light blue), Brighten Up (orange with coral beards), Piece of Cake (pink with orchid mark- ings), Red Zinger (deep red)
Miniature tall iris	Chickee (ruffled deep yellow), Disco Jewel (reddish- brown with violet), Loreley (yellow and violet) New Wave (clear white), Rosemary's Dream (white and orchid)
Border iris	Just Jennifer (white), Pink Bubbles (pink), Predictions (pink standards with falls), Tulare (yellow)
Tall iris	Beverly Sills (pink), Crystal Glitters (cream and peach), Darkside (purple), Fringe Benefits (orange), Lullaby of Spring (yellow and lavender), Silver Fizz (orchid), Spinning Wheel (blue standards), Venus and Mars (violet)





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Repeat blooming cultivars

Miniature dwarf	Ditto (cream and maroon bicolor)
Standard dwarf iris	Baby Blessed (light yellow), Jewel Baby (deep purple), Plum Wine (plum red with violet shading), Refined (pale yellow), Sun Doll (yellow)
Intermediate iris	Blessed Again (light yellow), I Bless (cream, flowers nearly all summer), Honey Glazed (pale yellow standards with mustard-yellow falls), Low Ho Silver (silvery white)
Border iris	Double Up (blue and white bicolor with dark violet borders), Ultra Echo (lavender with violet)
Tall iris	Bountiful Harvest (white and purple), Champagne Elegance (white and pink bicolor, ruffled petals), Clarence (white with violet falls), Feed Back (medium blue- violet), Eternal Bliss (violet with tangerine falls), Late Lilac (lilac), Immortality (white, may rebloom up to three times), Misty Twilight (pale violet-blue), Pink Attraction (ruffled pale pink), Queen Dorothy (white, stitched with violet edges, nearly an everbloomer), Silver Dividends (white), Suky (violet with white zones), Summer Olympics (light yellow), Violet Music (violet), Zurich (white with yellow beards).

Growth habit

Iris have thick, fleshy, underground stems (called rhizomes) that store food produced by the sword-shaped, semi-evergreen leaves. The rhizomes grow best when planted at or slightly below the soil surface with feeder roots penetrating the soil below.

Each year underground offsets develop from the original rhizome. Buds produce a large fan of leaves and several flower stalks. Success with iris depends on keeping the rhizomes firm and healthy. In general, this is done by providing the rhizome good drainage while the feeder roots below remain moist but not wet.

Site Selection and Preparation

A full sun exposure is preferred; however, some of the delicate pink and blue iris hold their color better in partial shade. Excessive shade will reduce or prevent flowering. Good soil drainage is essential to prevent rhizomes from rotting. It may be necessary to plant the rhizomes in raised beds (at least 6 inches high) to obtain proper drainage.

Iris will grow in many soil types but a light, loamy soil with a pH of 6 to 7 that has been amended with organic matter is preferred. A tight clay soil may keep the rhizome too wet and should have organic matter (pine bark, compost) incorporated to improve drainage. Manure is not usually recommended for iris but can be used if well-rotted and incorporated at least 6 inches deep into the bed (should not come in contact with rhizomes).

Fertilization of iris is important to obtain best results, but must be done in moderation. Nitrogen, potash, and phosphorus are essential for iris, but excessive nitrogen promotes lush growth that is more susceptible to rot diseases. At planting, incorporate 1/2 pound of a low nitrogen fertilizer such as 5-10-10 per 50 ft² (1 1/2 oz per 10 ft²). Taking and following the results of a soil test is the preferred method to determine fertilizer amounts.

Planting

The best time to plant bearded iris is July through September. This will allow them to become well established before winter. Container-grown iris can be planted in the spring. In a well-prepared bed, dig a shallow hole large enough to accommodate the rhizome or clump of rhizomes. Form a mound of soil in the center for the planting base. Make the mound high enough so the top of the rhizome is slightly above soil level. Spread the roots around the mound, fill with soil, and water. For a mass of color, plant at least three rhizomes (spaced 8 to 10 inches apart) or plant undivided clumps; point each fan of leaves away from the center of the group. Clumps should be spaced 18 inches apart. Mulch should be applied to fallplanted iris to reduce heaving during the winter.

Care and Maintenance

Before flowering, water plants often enough to keep the soil moist but not wet. Reblooming iris should be watered during the summer, while spring-flowering iris will tolerate drought. After flowers fade, cut flower stalks back to an inch or two above the rhizome to prevent seed formation. Plants that are growing well (good green foliage) may not need fertilizing. If you fertilize, apply 1/2 cup of 5-10-10 fertilizer per iris clump after flowering. Fertilizer can burn the rhizomes; it should be applied around but not directly on them. Reblooming iris should be fertilized in the spring as new growth begins and after spring flowering ends. Iris respond to shallow (1 to 2 inches) cultivation and should not be mulched. In early fall, cut leaves 6 to 8 inches from the ground, especially if foliage disease occurs.

After 3 to 5 years, iris generally become crowded and should be divided. Iris can be divided any time, but many growers prefer to divide 4 to 6weeks after the flowering period. Cut the leaves to one-third their length. Dig the clump and wash soil off with a hose. Cut rhizomes apart so that each section has at least one healthy fan of leaves and firm, white roots. Older rhizomes may seem firm but should be discarded since they have limited flowering capacity.

Common Bearded Iris Problems

Poor flowering—is normally due to planting in excessive shade, using excessive nitrogen fertilizer, or planting the rhizomes too deep. Limited flowering may also occur if plants become too crowded and need dividing.

Bacterial soft rot — is the most serious iris disease. Bacteria enter through injuries or cuts to the rhizome. Soft rot causes the rhizomes to become mushy and have a disagreeable odor. Use of fresh manure or excess nitrogen, coupled with poor drainage, contribute to soft rot development. Dig up and destroy diseased rhizomes. If the rot is not extensive, cut off and destroy diseased plant parts.

Crown rot fungus — causes a rot at the base of leaves where they join the rhizome and causes them to fall over. It is identified by reddish-brown "mustard seeds" which are produced by the fungus. Trim leaves to admit more sunlight and air movement to the rhizomes; carefully remove and destroy all diseased leaves.

Leaf spots — After flowering, leaves may become dotted with small, brown spots. Bacterial leaf spot has a watery, streaked appearance. Water-soaked margins around the spot turn yellow. Fungal leaf spots are rust-colored, drier, and more confined. Since disease organisms overwinter on old foliage, cut and destroy leaves of infected plants in the fall. Spray with a registered fungicide during extended periods of high humidity or rainy seasons.

Mosaic — is a viral disease that causes a mottling of leaves and flowers. It is transmitted by aphids. Remove and destroy infected plants and control aphids.

Iris borer — The first symptoms of iris borers are small notches on the leaf edge or small accumulation of sawdust frass in early spring. Iris later develop loose, rotted bases and holes in rhizomes. Bacterial soft rot readily attacks borer-infested plants. Carefully remove and destroy old leaves, stems, and plant debris in the fall. A registered insecticide can be applied to the rhizomes in the spring as new growth occurs.

For additional information, visit the American Iris Society Web site: http://aleph0.clarku.edu/~djoyce/iris/soc.html#AIS