



## Iris Colors in the Landscape

Bearded iris is a hardy, long-lived perennial that requires minimal maintenance. The flowers come in many colors including blue, pink, purple, reddish, white, yellow, and bi-colors. Most of the bearded iris flower between April and June.



*The tall bearded iris varieties are the most popular type. This bi-colored tall bearded iris variety, "Gentle Dragon," makes a colorful addition to the garden.*

Iris have thick, 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 with good drainage while the feeder roots below remain moist, but not wet.

### Planting

Site selection for iris is crucial. Good soil drainage is essential to prevent the rhizomes from rotting. It may be necessary to plant the rhizomes in raised beds to obtain proper drainage. Because a tight clay soil may keep the rhizome too wet, incorporate organic matter to improve drainage. Iris need a full sun location to thrive. Excessive shade will reduce or prevent flowering.

The best time to plant bearded iris is July through September. This timing allows the plant to become well established before winter. Container-grown iris can be planted in the spring. Plant the rhizome slightly below soil level. Plant at least three rhizomes 10 inches apart with the fan of leaves pointing away from the center of the group.



*Before replanting an iris, trim the leaves to a 6-inch fan and trim long roots.*

## Caring for Iris

Before flowering in the spring, water plants often enough to keep the soil moist, but not wet. After the flowers fade, cut the flower stalks back to an inch or two above the rhizome to prevent seed formation.

Plants that are growing well may not need fertilizing. Iris respond to shallow cultivation for weed control. They should not be mulched. Mulch will hold moisture around the rhizome and cause rot. In the fall, cut the leaves back to 6 to 8 inches above the ground. This cut-back is especially important if foliage disease is a problem on the plants.

## Divide and Multiply!

Divide iris every three to five years to prevent overcrowding. Iris can be divided at any time, but many growers wait six weeks after bloom to divide. Cut the leaves to one-third their length. Dig the clump and wash off the soil 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 they should be discarded since they have limited flowering capacity.

## Potential Problems for Iris

The iris has three major problems that can affect the plant: bacterial soft rot, leaf spots, and iris borer.

Bacterial soft rot is the most serious iris disease. Bacteria enter through injuries or cuts to the rhizome. Soft rot causes the rhizome to become mushy and have a disagreeable odor. Fresh manure or excess nitrogen, coupled with poor drainage, contributes to soft rot development. Dig up and destroy diseased rhizomes.

Leaf spot will result in the leaves being covered with brown spots. Since disease organisms overwinter on old foliage, cut and destroy leaves of infected plants in the fall. Spray the foliage with a fungicide during extended periods of high humidity.

Iris borer is another serious problem. The first symptoms of iris borer are small notches on the leaf edge or small accumulations of sawdust frass in early spring. The iris later develop loose leaf fans with rotted bases. Holes quickly become evident in the rhizome. Bacterial soft rot readily attacks borer-infested plants. For control, carefully remove and destroy old leaves, stems, and plant debris in the fall. Then in the spring, treat the rhizomes with an approved insecticide once new growth occurs.



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