

## IRIS CULTURE

**PLANT NOW!** If you must delay planting of these rhizomes for more than a few days, then “heel-in” the plants in a vacant area of your garden or plant temporarily in pots. If neither of these options is possible, then keep the plants in a cool, shady spot. Do not wrap the plants in plastic or try to keep moist; the risk of rot from keeping the plants too damp is greater than the damage done from getting too dry.

**SITE SELECTION:** Choose a location for your iris that receives at least a half day of sun, full sun is preferable. Planting on the south side of a building or solid fence can increase the risks of late frosts damaging your blossoms. The reflected heat from these structures can promote premature growth in the spring, making the bloomstalks more vulnerable to late freezes. You can lessen this hazard by keeping your plantings several feet away from these heat producing structures.

**SOIL PREPARATION:** Consider working organic matter (compost, peat moss, etc.) into your soil before planting. If you have a clay soil, this will loosen the structure thereby improving the drainage. If you have sandy soil, the organic matter will provide some holding capacity so water and nutrients can be used more readily by the plants. Work some fertilizer into the soil before planting. Any complete fertilizer that is designed for vegetables or flowering plants is a good choice. Avoid fertilizer that is high in nitrogen, the first number in the formula, and look instead for something high in phosphorous, the second number. For example: 5-10-5, 1-10-10, 10-30-20, and 12-36-14 would all be acceptable formulations. The exact numbers are not important, so long as the first number is not the highest. Bone meal is a good fertilizer for iris, although not complete, but may be slow to break down and become available to the plant, especially in dry soils.

**PLANTING:** These iris plants are technically rhizomes, the rhizome being the enlarged fleshy root stock from which the green leaves emerge above and the roots protrude below. In planting, the rhizome should be set so the top is just below the surface of the ground. Roots should be spread out and down to give a good anchor. Press soil firmly around the plant and water well to further consolidate the soil. Space plants 12 to 20 inches apart. Plants spaced farther apart will not need to be divided as soon as the closer plantings. Keep in mind as you position the rhizomes that the new growth will be to the sides and back (the leaf end) of the plant.

**FEEDING & WATERING:** Especially for the first several weeks after planting, the iris should be kept well watered, but do allow the soil surface to dry out between waterings. Once established, iris require very little supplemental watering, except in arid areas. More harm can be done by overwatering. Bearded iris do not like to sit with “their feet wet” for extended periods. On established plantings, fertilizers can be worked in around the plant when growth starts in the spring and then again in summer during active growth. See soil preparation section above for specific recommendations.

**MAINTENANCE:** After the flowers have faded, cut off the bloom stalks and discard. This will provide a tidier appearance and prevent seed pods from forming. There is no need to trim back

the leaves, except when transplanting, as long as the leaves are green and healthy. In the fall, after frost, leaves may be cut back if desired.

After about four years, your iris clumps will become crowded and bloom will decrease. In most areas of the country, July and August are the ideal months to dig, divide, and replant. After digging the clumps, break or cut off the new rhizomes with good green leaves and firm healthy roots. The old pieces of rhizomes may be discarded. The leaves may be trimmed back to about 8 inches, and any long roots clipped to aid in the replanting. Avoid leaving the plants out of the ground for more than a week.

Iris do not like competition from other iris or other plants, so keep weeds out. Avoid deep cultivation close to the plants since the roots are quite shallow. Don't use mulch up close to the plants, as this tends to keep the soil too moist.

**PESTS AND PROBLEMS:** Iris are easy to grow. You should experience few, if any, problems if you follow the cultural practices that have been outlined.

In some areas of the country, principally the northeast & upper Midwest, one should be on the lookout for the iris borer. Symptoms of borer damage start with pinholes or notches in the leaves in spring, followed by frass or "sawdust" around the base of the plant. There may also be a slimy, watery appearance at the base of the plant and leaves. The larva of the borer may be found in the hollowed out rhizome in summer. Sanitation can go a long way in control of the iris borer by destroying eggs and larvae. For chemical control, check with your local County Extension Agent for current recommendations.

Not all iris will bloom the first spring after transplanting, the average is about 60%. If you don't have bloom the second or third year, and late frosts or other unusual weather conditions are not a factor, make sure you have met the other cultural conditions, like plenty of sunshine. If all fails, move the non-blooming plants to another location.

"My iris all turned purple (or blue or yellow)..." We hear this several times a year. Iris are very stable and the new growth that comes from the rhizomes will produce the same color flower as the original. If this weren't the case, we would have a hard time staying in business. The supposed "color change" usually comes about because of two conditions. First, seeds were allowed to form and drop to the ground and the resulting new plants may be very different from the parents. Second, a variety that is very vigorous in its growth habits is allowed to crowd out the others, or new plants are put in soil where seeds or pieces of an old vigorous variety may still exist. It may appear that the plants have changed color, but rather the "bullies" have muscled them out.

If you have other problems or questions, just drop us a line and we will be glad to try and help you.

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