

Care and Maintenance of the Iris

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Iris, Flag, Fleur-De-Lis. Whatever the name, this bold beautiful flower has been gracing gardens all over the world for centuries. With more than 200 species and thousands of varieties with varying cultural requirements there is an iris for you and your garden. Irises range in size from the tiny dwarf miniatures reaching no more than ten inches to the tall Siberian iris or Yellow Flag measuring up to four feet, and come in a rainbow pallet of colors. Being careful to select the right species and variety for your area and soil type is important as different irises have different cultural needs.



Irises are divided into two main types; rhizomatous roots (swollen underground stems), and true bulbs. Typical irises have three outer petals that hang downwards, called “falls” and three inner petals that are upright, called “standards”. Blooms are usually borne on a single stem rising above sword or reed like leaves protruding from the rhizome or bulb.

When preparing a new bed for irises, or any planting, a soil test is a good idea so you will know what soil amendments are needed. This can be done easily through your local



Texas AgriLife Extension Service. Once you know the quality of the soil and its pH level you can choose what irises would be best or amend the soil to meet the needs of the irises you like. Consideration of placement should be given in order to conceal the leaves as they die back after flowering. A good way to do this is to mix them in with perennials that can camouflage them as they complete their cycle for the season.

Bearded irises, named for the fine hairs found on the “falls” enjoy growing in fertile, well-drained alkaline soil in full sun although some will tolerate drier conditions. Rising from long, dark evergreen leaves and slender rhizomes beardless irises prefer moisture retentive soil that is slightly acidic and can tolerate light shade. Many do well in bog gardens or in standing water. Crested or Evansia irises have similar needs to bearded irises though a few need damp acidic soil and a sheltered spot. There are a few that are suitable for rock gardens and dry well drained soils. As you can see, knowing the growing requirements of your soil and your chosen iris is a good idea. However, irises are hardy plants that can adapt to less than ideal circumstances.

Bearded irises should be planted no later than six to eight weeks before the first freeze in your area to allow roots to develop before winter but can be planted as early as mid to late summer. Planting in warm weather reduces the chances for bacterial root rot. To plant iris rhizomes, dig a fan shaped hole deep enough and with a large enough circumference to accommodate the roots when they are spread out. Place the rhizome in the hole, on a slight hill, with the roots spread out under it and the rhizome facing the direction where the most sun will shine on it. Cover the roots and pack down, leaving the rhizome exposed. If you live in an area that receives many freeze-thaw cycles, cover the rhizomes slightly so the iris will not be pushed out of the ground.

Beardless and other true bulb varieties should be planted the same time as other bulbs, mid fall. They should be planted in a hole at a depth three times the height of the bulb. Sand can be added to the bottom of the hole if the soil has a lot of clay to encourage drainage. If you mulch the bulbs, make sure to include it when measuring the hole.

When irises begin to crowd or bloom quality lessens they should be dug up and separated, about every three to four years. The best time to divide bearded irises is right after flowering but can be done until early fall. After digging rhizomes separate with a very sharp knife, cutting out and disposing of the old center part of the rhizome. Make sure that each new “eye” has roots attached when dividing. Before replanting cut the leaves of bearded irises into a fan shape with leaves about five inches long. Iris bulbs can be dug after the top dies down, in late summer, and the bulblets planted in new holes. To prevent fungus infection dip bulbs and rhizomes in fungicide before planting. With a little thoughtful preparation irises can provide years of beauty with very little care and maintenance.

