



Growing Iris

Tall bearded iris varieties include a full spectrum of color combinations and choices.



PLANTING TIPS FOR BEAUTIFUL BLOOMS

BY STEVE HUDDLESTON

Iris, you might say, are iris-istible. They certainly were to Mr. Putman, the man who lived next door to me when I was a child. He had a semicircular bed of iris planted around a birdbath in his back yard. Every spring I enjoyed looking through the chain-link fence at his blooming beauties. Wanting to have the same beauty on my side of the fence, I dug up what I thought looked like iris from the lawn and planted these imitations in flowerbeds. What I had dug up was actually yellow nutsedge. Now that I'm a more seasoned gardener, I don't recommend planting nutsedge as a substitute for iris. I can, however, offer some tips on planting the real thing.

CLASSIFICATION

There are several classifications of bearded irises based on their height. Miniature dwarf bearded irises (MDBs) grow no more than 8 inches tall. Standard dwarf bearded irises (SDBs) grow from 8 inches to 15 inches tall. Intermediate bearded irises (IBs) range from 16 inches to 27 inches tall and look best a short distance in from the border's edge. Miniature tall bearded irises (MTBs) are so named because they are intended to be miniature versions of the popular tall bearded iris. They range in height from 16 inches to 25 inches. Border bearded irises (BBs) reach 16 inches to 27 inches in height, bloom at the same time as tall bearded irises and are best adapted to windswept areas where taller plants would require staking. The glory of the irises is the tall bearded iris (TBs), the one familiar to most people. TBs reach a height of at least 28 inches and can attain a height of 32 inches to 38 inches. The tall bearded iris sports extravagant flowers and comes in every color except true red.

CULTURE

Bearded irises need full sun. Less than half a day of full sun will reduce the number of flowering stalks and reduce overall plant growth. Dappled light is all right during part of the day as long as the plants get several hours of full sun.

Irises need well-drained soil. Wet, poorly drained soil promotes rot. If you have clay soil, amend it by rototilling 3 inches of expanded shale into it and then rototill 3 inches of aged compost into the mixture. Afterward, you will have loose, well-aerated soil in a raised bed that will drain well. If you have sandy soil, incorporate aged compost into the soil to increase nutrient and moisture retention.

A good way to decide which iris to grow in your yard is to attend spring iris shows that feature irises grown by members of local iris societies, such as the Iris Society of Dallas (www.irises-dallas.org). The Fort Worth Iris Society's spring show is April 14 at the Fort Worth Botanic Garden. You also can participate in tours of iris lovers' yards and attend the open houses of local iris growers such as Argyle Acres (www.argyleacres.com). After you see what you like, quickly place orders for those selections. Growers will then deliver your selections late summer through early fall, the time period for planting irises in north central Texas. You also can attend local iris sales in early fall such as the one held by the Fort Worth Iris Society on September 22 (see www.fortworthiris.org for details).

In the Dallas/Fort Worth area, plant iris late September through early October. The part you plant is called a rhizome (pronounced rye-zome), a plump, fleshy stem that grows horizontally at ground level and produces roots beneath and leaves and flowering stalks above. Plant the rhizome shallowly, allowing only 1/2 inch of soil to cover it. Use at least three rhizomes of the same variety in a triangle or a pattern that alternates plants in rows. Plant tall bearded iris about 1 1/2 feet apart, pointing each fan of leaves away from other plants in the group. Last of all, decide whether you want to mulch your iris or not. Many iris growers do not recommend mulching bearded iris because if the mulch is too thick, it can cause rotting of the rhizome.

Irises will thrive without feeding, but they certainly respond to fertilization. Determine which nutrients are lacking in your soil by having a soil test done. You can get a soil-testing packet from your local Texas Cooperative Extension office. Many experts recommend the application of a slow-release, low-nitrogen fertilizer such as 5-10-10 at planting time. Avoid high levels of nitrogen because it causes lush growth that is susceptible to rot. In early spring, just as foliage begins to grow, apply a faster-release, higher-nitrogen fertilizer such as 10-10-10 to encourage growth of the current year's plants. Around bloom time, a similar feeding will help set the flowers for the following year and encourage growth of offsets from the parent rhizome.

Bearded irises are drought tolerant. In fact, one iris grower told me to water them only at the time of planting and to let natural rainfall take care of the plant thereafter because overwatering can cause the rhizome to rot. He told me that if I did water after the initial planting, not to supply overhead irrigation once temperatures reach 85 degrees and above because water would fall and remain on the rhizome. He advised watering during the summer only if there is a drought and to use leaky hoses for irrigation so water does not get on the rhizome. If you have reblooming cultivars of iris, watering through a dry summer is essential.

After your irises have bloomed in the spring, cut the spent bloom stalks back to an inch or two above the rhizomes. There is no need to trim foliage unless it becomes unsightly. Leaves on a plant nourish the rhizome and promote growth of next spring's bloom stalks. Cutting off the foliage will, therefore, retard growth and bloom. Finally, irises need to be divided about every four years. Dig up your clump in late summer or early fall. Remove and discard the old center rhizome because it will not bloom again. Cut the roots shorter to make planting easier. Cut foliage back to within 6 inches to 8 inches from the rhizome to lessen the amount the new plant will have to support. As the plant grows, these leaves will die and be replaced by new ones.

Steve Huddleston is the senior horticulturist at the Fort Worth Botanic Garden, an official bird sanctuary and refuge for many forms of wildlife.