

## Reblooming Beauties

By Susan Camp

The loveliest flower of spring is the tall bearded iris, with its frothy cascade of ruffled petals in shades that range from the palest pastel yellows and pinks to rich, deep blues and purples. Every spring we eagerly anticipate the first blooms. In most years we are rewarded with the elegant beauty of these magnificent flowers, but, alas, they fade too soon. Even though the cheerful colors of summer flowers soon take their place, I still miss my favorite spring beauties.

Two seasons ago, we discovered reblooming irises and planted several to see if they would work in our region. We didn't see much reblooming last year, but are hopeful that as the plants mature, they will rebloom in mid to late summer. Our speaker at the March Gloucester Master Gardener meeting is a breeder and grower of reblooming irises, based in Chesterfield. He offered historical information and several helpful suggestions for planting and cultivating reblooming irises.

Reblooming, or remontant, bearded irises have been bred and grown for more than fifty years, but only came to the gardening public's attention in the late 1990's, according to our speaker. Since then, reblooming irises have grown in popularity, but there are several considerations to keep in mind if you decide to plant them.

The most important factor is to purchase plants from a reputable dealer. Most irises are bred on the west coast under very different climate and environmental conditions from eastern Virginia. It is best to buy from a local nursery or garden center, but, even then, the dealer may not be aware of the locale of origin or type of reblooming iris carried in stock.

Several types of reblooming irises are being bred, and some of them perform better in certain USDA Hardiness Zones than others. They will rebloom at different times depending on the zone. In Zone 7b, we can expect rebloom in July. Rebloomers or remontants produce more than one crop of flowers during a growing season and include bearded and beardless varieties. Cycle rebloomers complete two growth and bloom cycles in a single season without requiring chilling temperatures for development of new bloom stalks. Repeaters continue to bloom on old growth and include varieties of Japanese and Siberian irises. All-season rebloomers grow well on the west coast, especially in California. Rebloom carriers do not rebloom, but may produce rebloomers when crossed with a reblooming variety.

Reblooming irises require some extra care. They will grow best in a 4 to 8 inch raised bed cultivated to a depth of 12 inches according to the Reblooming Iris Society. A specific growing medium consisting of one part concrete sand to two parts organic material with the addition of one cup each of green sand, granular dolomite, rock phosphate and wood ashes. A slow-release 12-6-6 Nitrogen-Phosphorous-Potassium fertilizer with added trace elements completes the mix.

Rebloomers must be watered every other week, more often than spring-only bloomers, so you might want to keep them in separate beds to prevent root rot from developing in the single bloomers. Rebloomers increase more rapidly than other irises, and may need to be separated every two to three years. July to September is the optimal time for division. Plant irises 18 inches

apart to allow room for growth. Reblooming may not occur for several years, and is not guaranteed.

Fungal leaf spot, root rot, and bacterial soft rot are the major diseases affecting irises. Use good sanitation practices and remove plant debris. The primary insect pest is the iris borer. Slugs, snails, thrips, aphids, whiteflies, and crickets all damage irises.

Failure to bloom can occur if irises are planted too deeply or in deep shade; if they need dividing; or if they have been fed too much nitrogen fertilizer.

The Reblooming Iris Society website provides specific information on cultivating these gorgeous flowers. Numerous websites offer information on available varieties. Do yourself a favor and plant a few of these rainbow-hued beauties.

April 13, 2017