

The Iris- Empress of Flowers

by Susan Camp

If the rose is the queen of flowers, then the regal iris must be the empress. She stands tall, elegantly nodding her head to lesser flowers and mere mortals. The tall bearded iris, in particular, always attracts attention and admiration from gardeners and passersby. One cannot help but pause and appreciate the delicate construction of the blossom and breathe in the sweet fragrance. The colors of the iris range from white through sherbet shades to deeper hues, all the way to purples so deep they are almost black. The colors seem especially vivid this spring.

The iris is named for the Greek messenger goddess, symbolized by the rainbow. While it is fun to romanticize the iris and imagine it as a regal representation of the flower world, the iris is a plant with specific cultural needs and several pests and diseases. Iridaceae is a huge genus of 200-300 species. Most species grow from either rhizomes or bulbs. A few grow from fleshy tubers. The species are immensely diverse. The most popular irises grown in the United States are the tall bearded and other bearded varieties. The tall bearded iris, which is rhizomatous, is the focus of this column, but if you enjoy the beauty of the flower, the possibilities for your garden are almost infinite.

The tall bearded iris can reach a height of 2 ½ feet. The leaves are vivid green, fleshy, and sword-shaped. The showy flowers consist of three upright inner petals called standards and three outer hanging petal-like sepals, known as falls. Soft hairs along the midline of the falls form the beard.

Whether you have been growing irises for years, or are now contemplating introducing these lovely flowers to your garden, a few tips for growing them may be helpful. First, consider the location. Irises thrive in full sun to very light shade and need good drainage. Irises also prefer neutral to slightly alkaline soil, so, if you haven't already sent a soil sample to the Virginia Tech Cooperative Extension Service for analysis, now is the time to do it. Our Tidewater soil tends to be acidic, so you may need to add lime to your iris bed. Be sure to follow the recommendations for soil amendment on your soil sample report.

If you currently grow irises, remove the spent flowers and cut back the stalks to help prevent rhizome or bacterial soft rot, a disease that can damage or destroy a clump of irises. Rhizome rot, caused by the bacteria *Erwinia carotovora*, starts where the leaf fan meets the rhizome. Leaves will turn yellow and the rhizome reduced to a smelly, spongy mess. It is often possible to rescue affected plants by scraping off the infected tissue with a spoon and allowing the rhizome to dry in the sun.

Last week a friend asked me, "Why are my purple irises not blooming this year? They were great last year and nothing has changed." Nothing may have changed for my friend, but the irises did change. They grew!

The clumps of tall bearded irises will form a dense mat that needs to be lifted every 2 to 4 years. Lifting is easily accomplished by using a spading fork to avoid damaging the rhizomes. Shake off the dirt and separate the irises, either by hand or with a sharp knife. Discard the rootless “mother” rhizome at the center of each plant and keep the young rhizomes or “increase” to replant. A good rule of thumb is to discard any rhizomes without roots. Trim roots to 6 inches. A number of sources recommend allowing the rhizomes to dry for 24 hours.

Look for signs of rhizome rot or iris borer infestation. The iris borer is the larva of a moth that lays its eggs in fall leaf debris. The larvae leave the rhizome an empty shell. You may note piles of “sawdust” around an affected plant. Cleaning away fall and winter debris is essential to help prevent borer infestation. If borer problems continue, you may need to contact a Master Gardener for information on the correct pesticide to use. The Gloucester Master Gardener phone number is (804) 693-2602.

The best time to plant or lift irises is from July through October. If you are lifting established irises to replant in the same bed, compost worked into the soil will provide nutrition. Avoid high-nitrogen fertilizers, which can induce rhizome rot. Prepare a new bed 2-3 weeks in advance of planting by digging down several inches and working in compost or well-rotted manure. Dig two 4 inch deep trenches and make a ridge between them. Set the rhizome on the ridge and carefully spread the roots in the trenches. Barely cover the rhizome with just enough soil to anchor the plant. Iris rhizomes like to sunbathe. Plant rhizomes 1-2 feet apart. Watering the new plants regularly once a week during the summer is generally sufficient.

Observe leaves closely for signs of either bacterial leaf spot, caused by *Xanthomonas tardicrescens* or fungal leaf spot, caused by *Heterosporidium iridis*. Both types of leaf spot cause irregular yellow to brown discolorations on the leaves. Bacterial leaf spot is spread by splashing water or contaminated tools. Clean garden tools in a solution of 1 part household bleach (0.5% sodium hypochlorite) to 9 parts water. Fungal leaf spot spreads in the spring from old winter plant debris. Dispose of all diseased plant debris by burying or burning. VA Cooperative Extension Publication 450-600 will help you recognize and treat fungal leaf spot. It may be difficult to distinguish between bacterial and fungal leaf spot.

Irises require little work and provide lovely, showy beds and borders for many years. Irises increase quickly, so you soon will have beautiful plants to share with friends and family.

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