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Bearded Iris: The Rainbow of the Garden

by Dorothy M. Downing, UC Master Gardener

The Tall Bearded Iris is one of the most popular flowers around the world today. The plants are easy to grow, and the large flowers and strong sword-like foliage add both color and height to the garden. The name alone conjures up visions of brilliant spring flowers. Irises are available in many colors of the rainbow, including blue which is a hard color to find, to purple and almost black, but not in a true red. Shades of gold, apricot, orange, russet and dusky burgundy are popular, and many cultivars have flowers rimmed with yellow or white, or vivid splotches of contrasting color. It's no wonder that the plant was named after the Greek goddess of rainbows, Iris.
The petals of the iris flower have specific names. The down turned petals are called "falls"; the upright petals are the "standards". In some varieties, falls and standards are the same color; in others, they're different. Bearded iris get their name from the fuzzy, fringed structure that rests on each fall; beards may be the same or a different color from the falls.

Bearded irises are divided into types by size. Dwarf bearded iris grow 3 to 11 inches tall; intermediate ones reach 1 to 2 feet, and tall varieties grow 2 to 4 feet. All bloom in late spring to early summer. The repeat bloomers flower in early summer and then again in early fall. All are hardy perennials with potential in beds, borders and foundation plantings. Often the most difficult part about planting iris is selecting the varieties you want.

Origins: The parents of today's bearded iris (Iris germanica) came from the Mediterranean which has a climate very similar to our own. They are extremely drought tolerant, good for areas with little or no summer rains. Bearded irises grow from rhizomes, thick, fleshy underground stems. Rhizomes need plenty of sun (at least 6 hours per day) to bloom well and regularly. They do best in well drained soil, and require good air circulation so don't let other plants grow across the top of the rhizome.

When you buy a new iris, you will probably receive a rhizome with clipped roots and leaves. The best time to plant is in August or September, but I have had success planting iris from late spring after the weather warms through October.

Planting Irises: To plant irises, choose a sunny spot in well drained soil. Prepare the soil well, by spading or turning over the soil with a garden fork to a depth of at least 10 inches. Spread compost and fertilizer and work it into the top of the soil. This should be done 2 to 3 weeks before you are ready to plant. A well prepared bed will result in better growth and more bloom. Bone meal and a good garden fertilizer, low in nitrogen, are good for irises.

The roots must be buried firmly to hold the plant in place, but the rhizome should be near the surface. An easy way to achieve this is to dig two trenches with a ridge between them, place the rhizome on the ridge and spread the roots carefully in the trenches. Be sure to firm the soil tightly and allow enough for settling to keep the rhizome above any possible standing water. Fill the trenches with soil, letting the top surface of the rhizome be just barely beneath the surface of the soil. Then water to settle the soil and start growth, and again every 7 to 10 days until they are established. If you have several rhizomes, place them at least a foot and a half apart, pointing each fan of leaves away from the center of the group. Clumps should be planted about 18 inches apart in a random pattern.

Companion planting: The iris is a perfect background for smaller plants. The sword-like leaves and upright growth of irises makes a nice contrast to other plants in the garden all season long. Together with roses and peonies, bearded irises are the stars of the early summer flower garden.

Excellent perennial companions include sedum, Rudbeckia 'Goldsturm', purple coneflowers (Echinacea), Sedum 'Autumn Joy', lilies, Russian sage, and ornamental grasses such as blue oat grass (Helictotrichon sempervirens) and feather reed grass (Calmagrostis x acutiflora 'Karl Foerster'). Bearded iris planted with cannas can create a very tropical look. Daylilies and iris combinations work well together, contrasting the upright sword like leaf of the iris and the drooping leaf of the daylily.

Dwarf bearded irises make ideal rockery plants, teaming nicely with thyme, hens-and-chicks (Sempervivum) and pinks. I am very fond of orange and yellow violas interplanted with blue and purple iris.

This Saturday April 28th is the Seventh Annual Porterville Iris Festival. Please stop by the MG booth and ask your gardening questions!

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