

Bearded Irises: Planting and Culture

- When to plant** Plant the rhizomes soon after you receive them. Remaining out of the ground, stored in a dry indoor environment for several days, will not be harmful to them, but planting within a week or two is best.
- Where to plant** A well-drained, sunny location is best. Bearded irises need nearly a full day of sun to grow and bloom well.
- Soil preparation** Most local soils are fine for irises as they are, if there is good drainage. If a soil test shows nutrients to be lacking, add them as indicated.
- How to plant** Soak the rhizomes and roots in water a couple of hours immediately prior to planting. Dig a hole six inches deep and build a mound inside the hole. Place the rhizome on top of the mound so that its top will end up even with the soil level and its roots are spread out over the mound. Fill in the soil and firm it down. In a good loamy soil, the rhizome should be just barely covered. In a heavy clay soil, the top of the rhizome should be showing above the surface. Water well immediately after planting. Thereafter, water only in extended dry periods—bearded irises are native to near-desert conditions. Do not mulch—using Preen helps to control weeds.
- Feeding** A light feeding of granular fertilizer (5-10-10 or 6-24-24) in late fall is helpful, maybe a small handful for a tall bearded, less for smaller types. Some growers like also to provide a light feeding of Miracle-Gro or equivalent about a month before bloom time.
- Cut them back?** Healthy green leaves should not be cut back. As old leaves naturally wither and brown, remove them. Also remove any diseased foliage. (You may want to spray with Daconil and/or other fungicides if leaf spot troubles you.) Be especially careful to remove and destroy all old leaves and other debris late in the winter, before March, when warm days could hatch the eggs of insects that overwintered on them.
- What about borers?** Iris borers can be a problem in much of the country, including here. Good cleanliness goes a long way toward avoiding problems, but may not work every year. Learn to recognize the signs of borer infestation and vigorously go after any that you detect. For more information, visit <http://www.irisgarden.org/borermain.html>
- Bloom season** Blooming stalks can be enjoyed in the garden or cut for display indoors in a vase or arrangements. Spent flowers should be snapped off. When the stalk has finished blooming, snap it off close to the ground by bending it on a dry day.
- Dividing** Clumps should be divided every three or four years. Dig the entire clump in July or August. Cut the leaves back to 6” or so. Remove the soil and separate the rhizomes. Discard old rhizomes, keeping only those with fans attached and their increase—the new plant buds just emerging from them. Wash them off, dry them, and trim the roots to 4” or so. Label them, and store them in a cool dry place, to replant soon.
- More info** Learn more about these and other irises from your local iris society affiliated with the American Iris Society, <http://www.irises.org/>