

Growing Bearded Iris in Central Texas

Provided by the Belton Iris Society

When to plant: In Central Texas, Fall (September & October) is the best time to plant irises. The roots need time to become established at least 4 to 6 weeks before the first hard freeze. In Temple, Texas the first hard freeze averages November 26th and the last freeze averages March 3rd.

Where to plant: Plant in full (6 to 8 hours) sun. Irises can grow in shaded conditions but will not bloom well, if at all. Bearded iris can be grown in raised beds, directly in the landscape, or in pots.

Soil: They prefer a well-drained soil with a pH of 6.8 (slightly acidic), but are quite tolerant of less-than-perfect soils. Adding sand and/or compost to soil can assist drainage.

Planting: The rhizome should be planted at or just below the soil level. The roots should be on either side of and below the rhizome to anchor it down. The back of the rhizome is called the heel and has the fan of leaves and the front of the rhizome is called the toe. Space different varieties at least 24" apart or for a clumped effect, 8" apart with toes facing each other. Depending upon the maturity of the rhizome and geographical location, there may or may not be blooms the first Spring.

Watering: Bearded iris do not like standing in water. Overwatering iris is a common mistake and causes rot. Irises are drought tolerant. Water when the top 3" of soil dries out. Less frequent deep watering is better than frequent shallow watering. Essentially, water more often in Summer and less often in Spring, Fall, and Winter.

Fertilizing: Fertilize during "candy months": February (Valentine's Day), May (Mother's Day), and October (Halloween). Reblooming iris (varieties that produce more than one crop of bloom stalks in a single growing season) may benefit from an extra dose of fertilizer after the first blooms in April. In zone 8, rebloomers may have a second bloom time in August or September. Use a general all-purpose fertilizer with a N-P-K ratio of 5-10-5 or 10-10-10. We have also found that alfalfa pellets (without salt) are an alternative to commercial fertilizers and are very beneficial and inexpensive. Manure-based products are not recommended as they can induce rot. Do not put fertilizer directly on the rhizome, as this might harm the rhizome. Instead, sprinkle on the ground around the rhizome, over the root zone area.

Dividing: Iris clumps may become crowded over time. Rhizomes require good air circulation to prevent disease and crowding also causes bloom decline. Divide and replant rhizomes every three to five years. Dig up the entire iris clump and inspect for borer holes, disease, and rot – discard contaminated rhizomes. Using a sharp knife, cut nodes (babies) that are at least ¾" wide, with their own root system and fan of leaves, off the mother plant. Trim the leaves to approximately 6" in a reverse "V" pattern. Trimming may prevent wind toppling, help in establishing the root system, and aid in cleaning/disinfecting the rhizome. To prevent spreading diseases from soil, remove excess soil and soak the entire rhizome, including fans, in a 10% bleach solution for up to 10 minutes, then dry. Replenish the soil if needed and replant rhizomes the same way the original rhizomes were planted. Always water your transplants after planting and check planting depth after watering. Remember to label your rhizomes before transplanting if you want to remember their names.

Life Cycle: After blooming, the mother rhizome changes its energy use from blooming to the creation of nodes or "babies". Mother rhizomes will naturally shrink from toe to heel as the nodes grow. Spent mother rhizomes can be discarded. Each node becomes a new mother rhizome. This is called vegetative propagation.

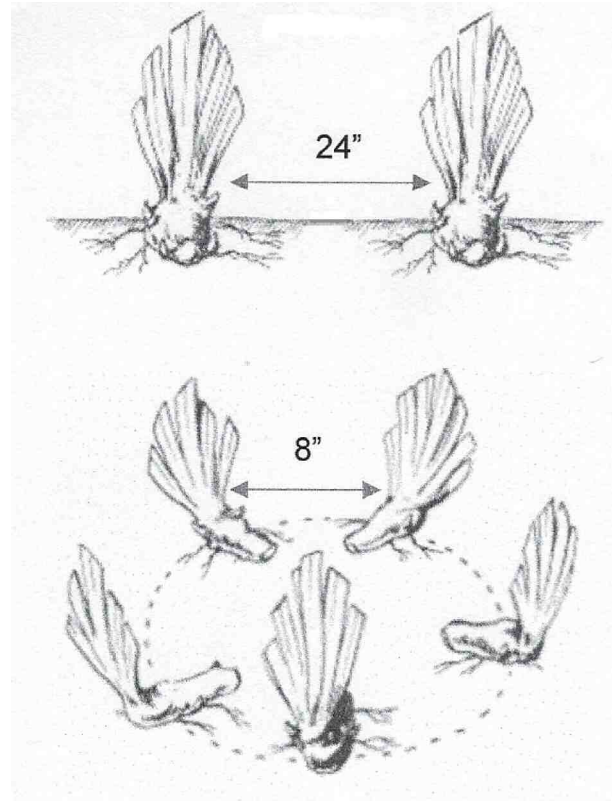
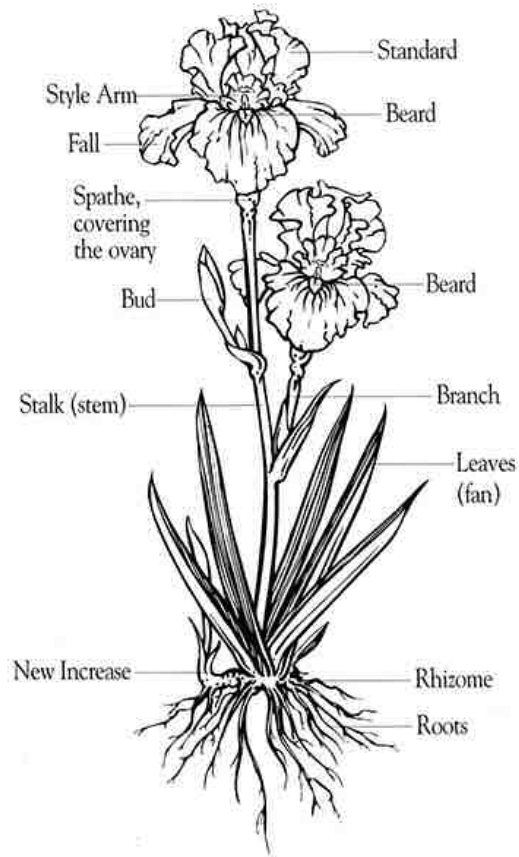
General Care: Weed iris beds so the rhizomes do not compete for water and nutrients. Do not mulch irises, as mulch helps trap water and may cause rot. Do not trim back fans once established, just remove brown, spent leaves as they can collect water and cause rot. After blooming, remove the bloom stalk. A quick tug backwards will usually snap off the stalk. If the stalk is left on, and fertilization occurs, a seed pod may develop. The seeds will not be the same variety as the rhizome that developed the seed pod. Named irises should remain pure, using only vegetative propagation.

Need Help: Come to one of our meetings! Just google: "Belton Iris Society" for information on our club. We love to share ideas, tips, help, rhizomes, and great food.

Source: Our affiliate, The American Iris Society's website: www.irises.org. Compiled by K.A. Woods.

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Rhizome Planting

