

LOUISIANA IRIS CULTURE

Starting Rhizomes. Sterilized rhizomes can be placed in clean water until they can be planted. Before planting, take scissors and cut away dead mushy roots next to the rhizome or peel them away with your hands. Plant rhizome an inch below the surface of the soil. Water often but don't keep the soil wet until new growth begins.

Bed preparation. Louisiana iris will grow in almost any garden soil that can be kept moist. They do better in soil that has been well amended with organic matter. Sphagnum peat moss, cotton seed meal, cotton seed hulls, alfalfa pellets, and bagged manure are all good organic amendments. Use all the amendments you think you need and then some, preferably 3 to 5 inches of organic matter to each bed. The lighter the soil, the more quickly the plants become established. Sand can be added for drainage and its weight may help hold the plants down. Leaf mold and homemade compost are also good soil amendments. If the soil is very alkaline, soil sulfur or aluminum sulfate can be added.

Lined Beds and Containers. A great way to grow Louisiana iris is to line entire beds with heavy black plastic several sheets thick or rubber ornamental pond lining material. It is only necessary to dig down 12 to 14 inches. Allow a 3 x 3 foot area for each plant. So for a double row, dig a 6 foot wide bed with the length being a multiple of 3. Throw all the soil to one side, line the bed, and place the soil and amendments back inside. An easier way is to dig down 7 or 8 inches and add a border of 2 x 6's to the top of the existing soil line. Line the bed and place the soil and amendments back in. This will minimize the work by not having to remove as much soil and will give you a 5 inch area for the organic material you will add. If the bed is to be level with the ground, some soil will have to be removed to allow for the organic matter. Entire beds can be built above ground and lined. Treated lumber, rocks and the new concrete wall blocks make for many choices.

Large containers such as ½ barrels can be sunk into the ground to plant Louisiana irises in. Holes can be drilled about 4 inches below the top of the container so the soil at the top can dry out. You can compensate for overly wet soil by planting the rhizomes high in the containers where they seem to do extremely well. The soil will stay wet and may sour but the rhizome is high enough in the growing medium to get plenty of oxygen. Even sunken kiddie pools can make great growing containers but look better if sunk in the ground where the colored plastic doesn't show.

Planting. Plant in the fall after the plants have become established in their pots and the weather has cooled. Place the plants on 3 foot centers and plant the rhizomes a little higher since the soil may stay extremely moist through the fall and winter. Light mulch will help conserve moisture and keep the weeds down. A weak solution of liquid plant (Miracle Gro) should be applied at planting. Do not fertilize heavily in the fall because rampant soft growth may be hurt by cold winter weather and the rich soil will provide sufficient nutrients. Mulch newly planted irises to give rhizomes protection from freezing. Additional layers can be added just before a freeze.

Fertilizing. Start fertilizing as soon as plants begin active growth. A first time fertilization with a “super bloom” type liquid fertilizer works well. As the weather warms, begin fertilizing every 2 weeks or so. For small gardens a watering can works but for large plantings a hose-end sprayer makes for quicker work. Spray the foliage and the soil with each feeding. If foliage is yellow Mir-Acid can be used but do not use excessive nitrogen early in the spring. Nitrogen will encourage soft new growth and a late cold snap can damage foliage and stalks. Large amounts of nitrogen and extremely acid soil seem to trigger rust outbreaks in the spring. After bloom continue monthly fertilization and water weekly to keep all plants actively growing. If any cultivar tries to go dormant, make sure to supply more water and apply additional fertilizer.

Insects and Diseases. Insects can be a problem with Louisiana irises just as with bearded irises. Don't worry about insect damage too much after bloom. Spraying with an insecticide before bloom can keep things from eating into the plant often damaging buds and future blooms. Leaf miners will cause streaking of the foliage and any insecticide should kill them; however, systemic insecticides may work best.

Borers. Use Cygon 2E early in the spring to kill borers. Any of the Bayer products with Merit in it works well as a systemic insecticide making the entire plant poisonous.

Leaf Spot and rust can be sprayed with a fungicide. Most fungicides will work on leaf spot but the ones specifically for roses seem to do more with rust. Both can be left untreated unless the outbreaks are severe. These diseases occur mainly in the spring and neither is usually very bad.

Rot can occur in Louisiana irises but is not as prevalent as in bearded. Insect damage or other damage to the rhizome can trigger rot. Use Comet or bleach if rot is found. The Comet or bleach dry the infected tissue. Anti-bacterial soap will work also. The fungus attacks the rhizome or fan near the soil line and rot sets in as a secondary infection. An application of sulfur may control this to some extent. Terrachlor is another alternative and perhaps the best chemical for handling this disease. Symptoms include stem and foliage yellowing seemingly overnight or plants that appear to have gone dormant for no apparent reason. Look for the mustard seeds or cottony growth on the stem or between the leaves. Treat immediately and remove all infected material from your garden. Corn meal incorporated into the beds has showed promise resulting against fungus but may work best in an organic program.

Seasonal Care. Other than watering and feeding, seasonal care involves removing spent stalks and keeping old discolored foliage cut and removed from the irises. Make certain not to let the bee pods ripen and seeds fall to the ground. These seeds may produce unnamed cultivars in your collection. Bee pods can just be snapped off the stalk but it is better to remove the entire stem. Take care when cutting or removing old foliage. Use scissors and trim down to where the good foliage begins. Just yanking the old foliage off the rhizome can damage or dislodge new growth found along the rhizome. Iris beds should be kept free of weeds during the entire year. Mulch is helpful with Louisiana irises in the fact that it suppresses weeds, conserves moisture and also protects the rhizomes from sun scald and heat in the summer and cold in the winter.