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Iris Growing Tips

To those of you who have recently become interested in Tall Bearded Irises and wish to grow these beautiful flowers, I would like to pass on some tips that may be of some assistance to you.

The first consideration is the fertility of your soil, the best way to determine this is to analyze the soil. Kits can be purchased or you can obtain this service through your local County Agricultural service for a fee and it is well worth the cost. For more information call your C. A. S. (listed in the telephone directory). Tell them you would like a soil analysis consisting of the following: soil pH, Nitrogen, Phosphorus and Potassium (Potash) content. Without this information there is no way to determine the correct type or amount of fertilizer that is needed for your garden. The soil pH test is probably more important than all the other tests, if the pH is too low or too high the plant nutrients become locked-up in the soil and they are unavailable to the plant(s). This is true for all plants, not just tall bearded irises. Tall bearded iris prefer a soil with a pH reading of 6.5 to 6.8.

Choose a sunny location that is well drained. Since so many areas around here have caliche layers, you may prefer to make raised beds and prepare your beds using compost, peat moss, sharp builder's sand or whatever you like to use to open up or loosen the existing soil. Raised beds are ideal, but remember to raise the iris rhizome

above the soil level so as to prevent water-logged rhizomes . Prepare your bed or beds several weeks before planting your irises . I broadcast an all purpose fertilizer over the bed area , spread well rotted compost up to a depth of 2 inches onto the area , add a layer of sharp builder's sand and scatter a thin layer of Agricultural (granular) Sulphur of top of this . This is worked into the soil with a rotary tiller to a depth of about 9 inches . If a tiller is not available then the area should be spaded as deeply as possible . This will encourage and or allow a deeper root system . I like to water the bed(s) to settle the soil and help dissolve the fertilizer and sulphur . Let the soil dry and then rake and level the bed(s).

Plant the irises after the weather starts to cool - latter part of September to early October .

I have 2 planting methods that I use . (#1) method . I use my hands to make mounds of soil . I have my thumbs touching and just push my fingers into the loose soil . I make a trench on each side of the mound by moving my fingers (squiggly) back and forth . I place the rhizome on top of the mound and spread the roots on each side of the mound and down into the trenches . Hold the rhizome firmly in place and scoop loose soil over the roots . I firm the soil around the roots and rhizome . (#2) method is simple and quick . I trim the feeder roots to about an inch from the rhizome and then simply poke the root trimmed rhizome into the loose soil and firm the soil around the rhizome .

I like to leave a small portion of the rhizome uncovered . Leaving the rhizome uncovered slightly helps cut down on soft rot and other similar iris diseases .

The plants should be set at least 18 inches apart and 24 inches is better , so as not to have to transplant so often . I have never seemed to be able to manage this -I usually plant my rhizomes 12 inches apart , and of course I know why I have to transplant each year . After you have planted all your irises , be sure to water them in . BUT go easy on watering after this . Wait until you see signs of growth (new fans peeking out of the soil) or you may encourage soft rot .

*You should try not to water tall bearded irises in the heat of the day and avoid wetting the foliage as much as possible whenever you do water .

To cut down on weeds and weeding , try using a herbicide . There are a number on the market . Be sure to read label to determine if it is safe to use on or around irises . I have used several different ones . The one that I liked and now use is TREFLAN . Be sure to wear gloves when working the soil after using any herbicide . I wear rubber gloves whenever I have to plant irises after I have treated soil as well as when I clean the clumps etc.

If , when cleaning around iris clumps (or just visiting the beds - which I try to do just about every day) you see evidence of soft rot ; leaves mushy looking where they were joined to the rhizome , the rhizome feels soft and mushy(to the touch) or you smell a very bad odor ; carefully move the soil away from the rhizome and use an old teaspoon to scrape or dig the rotted portion from the rhizome . Dust the firm white tissue with any household cleanser containing bleach (I use the cheapest cleanser I can buy) . Do not cover the rhizome with soil , let the sun reach the rhizome . Be sure to trash the rotted tissue and any leaves that you may have removed . DO NOT put any of it on compost pile . Keep an eye on the plant for a few days . If you see signs of soft rot , after this treatment , you may have to dig iris ; clean and treat again with cleanser containing bleach . Allow rhizome to air dry (out of direct , hot sun) for a few days or even weeks before replanting it in the ground in another location . You could pot the iris as a last resort . I potted about 30 of mine last year . I dug most of of irises and re-worked the beds . I cleaned all the irises and lay them on flats that I put in our greenhouse . There were some rhizomes that were quite small and I worried that they would dry up if left out of the ground too too long . Since my beds were not ready , I decided to pot the small iris rhizomes . As it was I only lost 2 that I had in pots .

Potted Irises

Potted irises, not in the same sense as potted meats, etc., but still a good idea. I have tried it with about 30 of my smaller and or sick looking irises (last year) and I saved most of them. Last year I dug, stored and re-planted just about all of my irises. I cleaned, trimmed and soaked all in a solution of clorox; rinsed all and lay them out to dry, on flats, in our greenhouse. Even tho I have shade cloth over the outside of the greenhouse and put up black plastic over the benches (that held the flats of irises) to provide more shade, the greenhouse still was fairly warm (ha! it was HOT most of the time.) I found I was loosing some of the smaller rhizomes, so I decided to pot them up and see how they faired. As I say, I saved most of them.

I have just read an article, on this subject, in an old AIS Bulletin, written by Fred Spahn (an iris grower and hybridizer, in Dubuque, Iowa.)

He wrote that he has always been a firm believer in early planting, especially in his area where a good root system needs to be established before their severe winters set in (and of course we can not plant early because of our hot, humid summers).

He wrote that he uses clay pots (6-inch is best for accommodating the average rhizome.) He mixed up large quantity of potting soil. He potted the new irises the same day as he received them. He trimmed the roots and when potting the rhizomes he would fill the pot, to within 1 inch of top, with soil. Watering was done about twice a week. Also fertilize with Rapidgro (or Peters liquid fertilizer-low N number).

The pots were placed in a semi-shaded area where they received direct sunlight for only a few hours each day. You might need to provide some shading until rhizomes "take hold" and start growing (roots).

Some of the advantages, that he listed, of this potting method are:

1. A better soil mixture can be provided than is available in the general garden. The soil mixture can be stored in large container (and thus be readily available when your irises arrive.)

2. Chances of getting scarce varieties and better rhizomes are enhanced by early ordering and shipment.

3. Newly planted irises aren't subjected to the intense heat or dried out soil conditions of midsummer (that fits our area, right?) before root systems are re-established.

4. A large group of potted irises can be watered or fertilized (use a weak solution of liquid fertilizer at 2 weeks intervals) with a sprinkling can in a few minutes as required.

5. New or reworked beds can be made available at a more leisurely pace.

6. Plants get the advantage of an earlier start and produce more increase by fall and thus better bloom the following year.

7. A closer check for soft rot and other diseases can be kept on those more expensive newer varieties. (Oh I go for that, I used to all but cry when I would go out to our iris beds and see an expensive iris giving up the ghost, no matter what I did to "cure" it.)

8. When irises have been potted for 4 weeks or more they can be transferred to their allocated places in the garden with little or no transplanting shock. A good fibrous root system should be visible on the outside of the earthen ball when removed from pot. The root system holds the earth together. Water the day before removing and they will come out easier. Of course dig the planting hole before removing the iris from the pot. Also pour about a pint of water into the hole. Place the dirt ball into the hole and firm the earth around it and you're all set.

Potted Irises (cont'd)

He wrote this last comment that I think is good. He said " If I have convinced you , and your irises haven't already gone to pot , why not see that they do."

For the benefit of our newer growers who may not be aware of what hot , humid summer weather and excessive watering can do to an iris bed . Let me say this it can be the death of your irises. So I would suggest that if you do use this pot method that you hold off ground planting the irises until cooler weather is in sight.

Record Keeping

Do you have some record keeping method? If not then you might want to start one. I think this is very important. I have tried several methods. The one that I like and am still using is 5 x 8 index cards. I cut out pictures of the iris (from catalogs and other sources) and paste on the card. Even tho the pictures are of almost perfect specimens , at least I get an idea of color , etc. Then I write as much information as I can find about the iris. This I file away until the iris starts to bloom (or not bloom-which ever the case may be). I also note information such as: number of bloom stalks and number of blooms per stalk. I also have diagrams of each bed , these are actually large squares , and I make notes about each iris on them. I have a list of all irises that I have bought. On this list I note date of iris bloom or make a dash if no bloom. This way I can tell at a glance how a certain iris has performed over a period of time.

Also be sure to make name tags for each iris (clump or single rhizome) that you purchase or have. Then when you plant the irises be sure to place the name tag where you can read it. Use a sun (fade) proof marker on metal , wooden or plastic tags. Plastic will deteriorate and will have to be replaced , probably yearly. We use metal labels that we purchase from Paw-Paw Label Company. Their address is usually listed in any gardening magazine .

When I get new irises , I use a water-proof marker to put either the name or initials of the iris on a center leaf. This way I feel that there is less chance of getting a wrong name on a given iris. I do find that no matter how careful I am at transplanting time , that I do get a few odd mix-ups; then I have to wait until bloom season and hope they bloom so that I can identify them.

Whatever method you decide to use to mark your irises, have fun doing it, as that is the reason for a hobby.