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How to Grow Irises: The Complete Iris Flower Guide



Photo Credit: Pixabay

Botanica *Iris spp.*
Latin Name:

Plant Type: Flower

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Planting, Growing, and Caring for Irises

By [Catherine Boeckmann](#)

Last Updated: April 28, 2025



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The tall, beautiful iris flower, named after the Greek goddess who rode rainbows, comes in many magical colors. Despite its divine origins, this beautiful flower is rugged, reliable, and easy to grow. Learn

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About Irises

More than 250 species make up the genus *Iris*. The most familiar irises are the tall bearded irises (*I. germanica*), which reach 2 to 3 feet tall. Their distinctive six-petaled flowers have three outer hanging petals (called falls) and three inner upright petals (called standards).

Irises may be a bearded or crested (aka beardless) type. Bearded irises are so-called because they have soft hairs along the center of their falls. The hairs on crested types, like the Siberian iris, form a comb or ridge instead.

Most irises flower from late spring to early summer. Some—mostly bearded hybrids—are remontant, meaning they may flower again later in the summer. The blooming period of Siberian irises tends to follow that of the bearded types.

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Irises attract butterflies and humming-birds and make lovely cut flowers. For iris companions in the garden, look to [roses](#), [peonies](#), and [lilies](#).

Read Next

- [Growing the Siberian Iris](#)
- [How to Grow Lilies: The Complete Lily Flower Guide](#)
- [Growing Japanese Iris](#)

PLANTING

Irises bloom best in full sun, meaning at least 6 to 8 hours of sunlight daily. They can tolerate as little as half a day of sun, but it's not ideal. Without enough light, they won't bloom well. Bearded irises must not be shaded out by other plants; many do best in a special bed.

Provide well-draining, fertile, neutral to slightly acidic soil. Loosen the soil to 12 to 15 inches deep, then mix in compost or aged manure. Good drainage is critical: Irises prefer “wet feet, but dry knees.” They will not tolerate wet soil in winter. Learn more about [preparing the soil for planting](#) and [organic soil amendments](#).

When to Plant Irises

- Plant most irises in late summer to early fall, when nighttime temperatures remain between 40° and 50°F (4° and 10°C) or above. This gives them plenty of time to get established before the coming winter.
- Tall bearded iris varieties are best planted closer to fall because they tend to go dormant in early to mid-summer.
- If you receive bare rhizomes or irises in a container at some point earlier in the year, plant them as soon as possible. It's better to get them in the ground rather than wait until the

- Plant bare-root rhizomes (the thick stems) horizontally, with the top exposed and only the roots underground. In areas with particularly hot summers, set the rhizome just below the soil surface.
- Dig a hole 10 inches in diameter and 4 inches deep. Make a ridge of soil down the middle and place the rhizome on the ridge, spreading the roots down both sides. Fill in the hole and firm it gently, leaving part of the rhizome and the foliage uncovered.
- Plant singly or in groups of three, 1 to 2 feet apart, depending on the fully grown plant's size.
- Soak **Siberian iris** rhizomes in water overnight before planting, then set them 1 inch deep (2 inches, if the soil is sandy), 2 feet apart. Over a period of years, they will form clumps; divide when blooms get smaller and vigor declines.
- Do not mulch around the rhizome, as this may encourage rot.
- Water thoroughly.



GROWING

How to Grow Irises

- In the early spring, remove winter mulch and old foliage to allow for fresh growth.
- Fertilize in early spring, scratching an all-purpose fertilizer around the plants. Avoid high-nitrogen fertilizers. Reblooming irises perform best if fertilized again after the first wave of flowering is finished.
- Do not overwater irises; too much moisture in the soil can cause the rhizomes to rot. Water consistently and deeply, especially during summer drought.
- Keep rhizomes exposed. Unlike bulbs

and air to dry them out. If they're covered with soil or crowded by other plants, they'll rot.

- Taller irises may need staking, or they will fall over.
- Deadhead (remove spent blooms) consistently. Bearded Irises flower sequentially on buds spaced along the stems.
- After blooming is finished, cut flower stems down to their base to discourage rhizome rot, but do NOT trim the iris' leaves. The plant's foliage carries on with photosynthesis and generates energy for next year's growth and flowers. Only prune off brown leaf tips, if desired.
- After a hard frost in the fall, cut foliage back hard, remove any foliage that appears spotted or yellowed, and dispose of all debris in the trash.
- If iris foliage is hit with heavy frost, remove and destroy it to eliminate borer eggs. [See your local frost dates.](#)
- For winter protection, cover the rhizomes with an inch or two of sand

forsythias bloom in the following spring.

- Iris borer, a common iris pest, overwinters as eggs in spent leaves. Signs include vertical streaks in the leaves. If apparent, look for the pests and squash them! If you see rot in the rhizome, dig it up and remove the affected parts. See pest tips below.

Dividing Irises

Over time, it's not unusual for plantings of irises to become overcrowded, which causes the rhizomes to lose vitality and stop blooming. When this happens (usually every 2 to 5 years), it's time to divide and replant healthy rhizomes in fresh soil.

When to divide? Do this task **after flowering finishes**, and then trim the foliage back to six inches.

1. Shortly after blooming (usually around midsummer), carefully dig up (lift) the clump of irises. You'll find

planted (the “mother”) has produced several offshoot rhizomes.

2. Separate these rhizomes from the mother with a sharp knife and discard the mother, as it will no longer produce blooms.
3. Inspect the rhizomes for any rotting tissue, soft spots, or other signs of disease, removing and discarding infected parts or entire unhealthy rhizomes.
4. Plant these fresh rhizomes in a new bed, replant them where they were before (after adding new soil), or share them with friends and spread the joy of irises!



Types

The tall **bearded irises**, *Iris*

ors. They are generally planted in the fall.

Rebloomers (remontant) varieties include:

- **‘Immortality’**: fragrant white flowers that appear in early summer and again in late summer; hardy to Zone 4
- **‘Feed Back’**: fragrant dark purple flowers; Zones 4 to 9
- **‘Earl of Essex’**: white flowers, with purple edging; Zones 3 to 10
- **‘Jennifer Rebecca’**: mauve pink flowers; Zones 4 to 9



Bearded Irises.
Credit: Pixabay

Siberian irises, *I. sibirica*, also come in a range of colors. They have a more delicate beauty than the stately bearded irises, but are equally as rugged. They also tend to be more pest and disease resistant.

- **'Fond Kiss'**: white flowers with pink flush; Zones 3 to 8



Siberian irises.
Credit: Pixabay.

Japanese irises, *I. ensata*, bear huge, flat blooms. These heavy feeders thrive on moisture during the growing season and do well around ponds; move to drier ground for fall and winter.

- **'Coho'**: pink flowers with golden flush; Zones 4 to 9
- **'Variegata'**: dark purple-reddish flowers; Zones 4 to 9



HARVESTING

Irises as Cut Flowers

- Cut flowers for arrangements when they are just showing color.
- Vase life is 3 to 7 days.

GARDENING PRODUCTS



PESTS/DISEASES

- Irises are considered deer-resistant and drought-tolerant.

Pest/Disease	Type	Symptoms	Control/Prevention
<u>Aphids</u>	Insect	Misshapen/yellow leaves; distorted flowers; leaf drop; sticky “honeydew” (excretion) on leaves; sooty, black mold	Knock off with water spray; apply insecticidal soap; inspect new plants carefully; use slow-release fertilizers; avoid excess nitrogen; encourage lacewings, lady beetles/bugs, spiders
Bacterial soft rot of iris	Bacteria	Dieback starts at leaf tips; leaves yellow/ wilt/separate from base; rhizomes rot; foul odor; plants may die	Cut out diseased rhizome tissue/air-dry cut surfaces for 1 to 2 days before replanting; for severe infections, destroy plants/surrounding soil (do not compost); remove plant debris regularly; disinfect tools; good air circulation; prevent plant injury; control iris borers; plant rhizomes at proper depth
Blight	Fungus	Leaves/stems/ entire plants wilt	Destroy infected

Pest/Disease	Type	Symptoms	Control/Prevention
		rot; fluffy, white fungal mats with mustard- seed-like balls on stems bases/nearby soil	rounding soil to at least 6 inches beyond plant and 8 inches deep (do not compost); remove plant debris regularly; disinfect tools; solarize soil; resistant varieties; good drainage
<u>Blight (Botrytis), "gray mold"</u>	Fungus	Yellow/ brown/gray spots with water-soaked margins on leaves/flowers; gray mold; buds remain closed; stem lesions; wilt/rot; scorched appearance ("fire") in some plants	Destroy infected parts/ severely infected plants (do not compost); remove plant debris regularly; disinfect tools; good air circulation/ sunlight; avoid overhead watering; prevent plant stress/injury; weed; rotation
Ink spot	Fungus	Yellow-margined, reddish brown leaf spots; brownish black powdery mass in spots; plants collapse; inky black stains on some rhizomes; rhizomes rot	Destroy infected leaves/rhizomes (do not compost); remove plant debris regularly; good air circulation; 3-year rotation

Pest/Disease	Type	Symptoms	Control/Prevention
		bored in rhizomes; slimy, stinky mess at plant base and rhizome	liage before pupation (and new moths, mating, eggs); inspect suspected rhizome damage, discard (burn/bury) affected ones; clean beds of plant debris after a hard frost
Iris weevils (“flag weevils”)	Insect	Beetle-like insects feed on flowers, seeds, pods of wild blue flag iris (<i>Iris versicolor</i>) and purple Siberian iris; deposit eggs in ovary, which pupate in seedpod; visible when flower is in bloom	Remove/destroy seedpods
Leaf spot (“bacterial leaf spot of iris”)	Bacteria	Varies; water-soaked rust/black leaf spots between veins later dry/fall out, leaving holes; leaves yellow/ distort/wilt/die; stem cankers	Destroy infected parts/ severely infected plants (do not compost); remove plant debris regularly; disinfect tools; prevent plant stress/injury; good air circulation; avoid overhead watering

Pest/Disease	Type	Symptoms	Control/Prevention
		pustules in lesions; disease progresses upward; leaves die	not compost); remove plant debris regularly; disinfect tools; resistant varieties; good air circulation; avoid overhead watering
Leaf spot (iris)	Fungus	Yellow/brown leaf spots with water-soaked/reddish brown/yellow margins dry out; black specks in lesions; leaves curl/yellow/die back from tip; poor flowering; plants weakened	Destroy infected parts (do not compost); remove debris regularly; resistant varieties; good air circulation/sun; avoid overhead watering; weed
Nematodes (foliar)	Nematode	Typically, starting on lower leaves, yellow/brown/purplish, angular spots or streaks change to dark green/brown/blackish lesions between leaf veins; dead areas may drop out; distorted/curled leaves may wilt/drop; symptoms move upward on plant; stems, buds, and flowers may also be affected; poor flowering; stunted or bushy growth	Destroy infected leaves/plants (do not compost); remove plant debris regularly; choose resistant varieties, if available; good air circulation/spacing; avoid overhead watering/keep leaves as dry as possible; weed

Pest/Disease	Type	Symptoms	Control/Prevention
		leaves and other parts may distort or die; poor flowering	including roots (do not compost); disinfect garden tools; choose resistant varieties; solarize soil; plant French marigolds (<i>Tagetes patula</i>) as a trap crop; rotate plantings
Nematodes (stem and bulb)	Nematode	Typically, leaves turn yellow then brown/distort/blister/wilt/die; swollen stems, crowns, leaf bases; poor/distorted flowering; plants stunted/die; fluffy white masses (“nematode wool”) may be present; discolored/distorted rhizomes soften/brown/crack/die; rhizome cross-section may show brown concentric rings	destroy infested plants and those within 3 feet, including soil (do not compost); disinfect tools; choose healthy, nematode-free seed/ plants; rotate plantings every 5 years, if possible; plant green manures such as mustard and radish; weed
Slugs/snails	Mollusk	Irregular holes in leaves/flowers; slimy secretion on plants/soil	Handpick; avoid mulch; use copper plant collars; avoid overhead watering; lay boards on soil

Pest/Disease	Type	Symptoms	Control/Prevention
			hot, soapy water; drown in deep container of 1/2 inch of beer or of sugar water and yeast sunk to ground level; apply 1-inch-wide strip of diatomaceous earth around plants
<u>Thrips</u>	Insect	Stunted plant growth; stippling; leaf drop	Knock off with water spray; use sticky traps; beat/shake foliage/flowers; clip off unopened/infested buds and shoot tips; submerge in mixture of 7 parts water to 1 part isopropyl alcohol and discard; water adequately, avoid excess nitrogen; deadhead flowers
Verbena bud moths	Insect	Tunnels/bores into plant shoots/stalks, seeds, and buds; moths do no harm	Handpick, or cut infestations, burn infested shoots and buds

Pest/Disease	Type	Symptoms	Control/Prevention
		leaves/stems/flowers; flowers streaked; stunting	compost); remove plant debris regularly; disinfect tools; resistant varieties/certified virus-free plants; control sap-sucking insects (aphids, whiteflies); weed
<u>Whiteflies</u>	Insect	All stages suck sap on leaf undersides; leave sticky “honeydew” (excrement), sooty, black mold; yellow/silver areas on leaves; wilted/stunted plants; adults fly if disturbed; some species transmit viruses	Remove infested leaves/ plants; use handheld vacuum to remove pests; knock off leaf undersides with water spray in morning/evening; set yellow sticky traps; apply insecticidal soap; invite beneficial insects and hummingbirds with native plants; weed; reflective mulch

WIT AND WISDOM

- The iris is depicted in the French royal standard *fleur-de-lis*. It is the emblem of New Orleans, Louisiana, and Florence, Italy, and the state flower of Tennessee.
- Orris root, taken from the dried roots of *I. germanica*, is used as a scent fixative in perfumes.

FLOWERS

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Catherine Boeckmann



Catherine Boeckmann loves nature, stargazing, and gardening so it's not surprising that she and The Old Farmer's Almanac found each other. She leads digital content for the Almanac website, and is also a certified master gardener in the state of Indiana. [Read More from Catherine Boeckmann](#)

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COMMENTS

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Jessica Hansen (not verified) 10 months ago

We are moving in a and I would like to take my irises with me, what is the best way to go about potting the plant?

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[REPLY](#)

Catherine (not verified) 10 months 2 weeks ago

We have irises in Florida. We hardly ever have a hard frost. When can we clean up the seasons leaves. Our plants bloom in the late winter or early spring.

[REPLY](#)

Several 1 of my iris are blooming but the flower is at the base of the plant, not on a tall stalk. Why?

REPLY

Sid Andress (not verified) 10

months 3 weeks ago

I have the same issue with some of my Iris's. Any help to resolve this issue would be greatly appreciated.

REPLY

Debra Albright (not verified) 1 year 9 months

ago

My beautiful bearded iris produced a multitude of what looked like large seed pods on stems. Knowing these are bulb producers, what are these & what do I do with them & what caused them to grow? Never have seen them before! Thank you! Debbie

REPLY

Ruth Self (not verified) 10 months 1 week ago

Like Debra, my irises get those Large seed pods on stems", too. What are they? What should be done with them?

REPLY

Linda (not verified) 10 months 4 weeks ago

what was the answer to Debbie about the bulb producers?

REPLY

Kk (not verified) 10 months 1 week ago

I found this on a search for iris seed pods...

<https://www.gardeningknowhow.com/ornamental/bulbs/iris/harvesting-seeds-from-iris.htm>

Kk (not verified) 10 months 1 week ago

I have loads of those “seed pods” and would love to know what to do with them!!!

REPLY

Mary C Colwell (not verified) 2 years 8 months ago

I was given some rhizomes 2 years ago, & planted them around my river birch tree. Theeaves have come up these last 2 seasons, but still no blooms. Any ideas why?

REPLY

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