



Growing Japanese Irises (*I. ensata*) Care and Culture

Japanese irises are among the most spectacular of all irises. With huge blossoms and a wide variety of flower forms, colors, and patterns, Japanese iris will be the focal point of any garden. They do require a little TLC, but are well worth the effort.

Hardiness Zone: 4 – 9

Bloom Season: Japanese irises are the last major group of irises to bloom—late June and into July in our garden.

Soil conditions: Japanese irises require a slightly acidic soil, with a pH between 5.0 and 6.5. They prefer a loose, rich soil with plenty of organic matter. Adding compost or aged manure will help them thrive. They do not do well in alkaline soil, and introducing lime or bone meal to the soil will kill them. Do not plant Japanese irises close to concrete, as lime leaches out of it.



Water: Japanese irises love water. They will grow and bloom with average garden water, but will thrive with 2+ inches of water per week. They do not like to grow in water, but will do well along the edge of a pond or along the side of a stream.

Sun: Japanese irises prefer full sun, but can tolerate a touch of shade. They need a minimum of 4 to 6 hours of sun each day. If grown in too much shade, they may not bloom.

Fertilizer: Japanese irises are heavy feeders. Mulching with 1 to 2 inches of organic compost each year helps. If you prefer, liberally apply a high-nitrogen fertilizer, I use 21-0-0 (ammonium sulfate) in the early spring and again just after bloom. DO NOT apply fertilizer to new transplants.

Dividing: Japanese irises need to be divided every 3 to 4 years. If not divided, they will choke on their own roots and eventually die. The best time to divide is fall, but it can also be done in the spring. Dig around the root ball and lift the plant out of the ground. Break the plant down to divisions of 1 to 3 fans, and trim off all the dead roots (live roots are white). Keep the roots wet until you are ready to re-plant.

Planting: Soak the roots of new plants overnight prior to planting. Plant each rhizome 1 to 2 inches deep and 18 to 24 inches apart. Keep divisions well-watered after planting until established. Add a layer of mulch (I use compost, but tree leaves or fir needles work, too) to help retain moisture and keep the weeds down.

When the foliage dies back in the fall, cut it off close to the ground and remove it from the garden. Japanese irises need 2 to 3 years to become fully established; the first year's bloom is not representative of their performance once mature.

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