



Growing Bearded Irises Care and Culture

Named for the Greek Goddess of rainbows, Iris make a stately display in any perennial bed. Bearded Iris are perhaps the most common of the genus iris. Bearded Iris are available from only a few inches tall to well over 3 feet tall, can be small-flowered or large, and come in any color combination you can imagine (and some you can't). Bearded Iris are a staple in any garden.

Note that these instructions are for growing in the Puget Sound area of the Pacific Northwest. For your local instructions, please contact Patrick at Patrick@CascadiaIrisGardens.com.

Hardiness Zone: 4 – 9 (perhaps to Zone 3)

Bloom Season: Dwarf Bearded Iris begin in early spring. Tall Bearded Iris bloom well into summer. As a general rule, the shorter the bearded iris, the earlier in the season they bloom.

Rebloom: There are many bearded irises that will rebloom; that is, they bloom during their regular time, then bloom again later in the year. Only those that are genetically predisposed to rebloom will, and only under proper conditions. Iris that rebloom in one region of the country, may not in any other. If you are looking specifically for reblooming iris, it is best to source them from local vendors or growers.



Classifications:

MDB: Miniature Dwarf Bearded (< 8")

SDB: Standard Dwarf Bearded (8" – 16")

IB: Intermediate Bearded (16 ½" – 27") — Medium size flowers on medium stalks

BB: Border Bearded (16 ½" – 27") — Large flowers on ample stalks

MTB: Miniature Tall Bearded (16 ½" – 27") — Small flowers on slender stalks with extra branching

TB: Tall Bearded (> 27")

AR and AB: Aril and Arilbred (from a few inches to over 3') Generally considered a collector's iris, as they have very specific demands, can be difficult to grow, and frequently go dormant or semi-dormant in the summer.

Soil conditions: Bearded iris require a slightly alkaline soil. They prefer a loose, rich, well-drained soil with plenty of organic matter. The addition of a little garden lime or bone meal will help them thrive. Bearded Iris will not tolerate being planted in an area that will have standing water. Ensure their rhizome will have the opportunity to dry out frequently.

Water: Bearded iris are somewhat drought tolerant, but they thrive with weekly watering. Allow the soil to dry between watering.

Sun: Bearded iris 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.

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Fertilizer: Bearded iris prefer a low-nitrogen fertilizer, such as a 5-10-10. Never apply chemical fertilizer directly on top of the rhizome. Bearded iris send roots out to 3'. Sprinkle the fertilizer well-away from the rhizome. Mix compost or aged manure into the soil at time of planting or as a mulch after planting, but be certain to keep the mulch 4" - 6" away from the rhizome. Never cover the rhizome with mulch, as it can retain moisture and cause the rhizome to rot. Fertilize once in the early spring and again directly after bloom season. Use only a little, perhaps a teaspoon per rhizome.

Dividing: Bearded iris should be divided every 3 to 5 years. If not divided, they will grow into a large clump with a center that stops blooming. The best time to divide is mid-summer, allowing the rhizome to send out new roots before winter comes, but it can be done July through September. Dig around the root ball and lift the plant out of the ground. Break the plant down to individual rhizomes, discarding the older rhizomes that have already bloomed. Trim the foliage and roots to about 4" each (shorter for dwarf iris). Bearded iris can live for weeks out of the ground, but it is best to replant them as soon as possible.

Planting: Plant each iris with the top half of the rhizome above soil level. This is to help ensure the rhizome can dry out and not rot away. Plant tall bearded iris 18" apart, medium-sized iris 12"-16" apart, and dwarf iris 8"-10" apart. Keep them far enough apart to allow good air circulation, as this can aid with the prevention of rot and leaf spot. There is no need to fertilize at this time; the rhizome should have plenty of energy to carry it until spring.

When the foliage dies back in the fall, cut it off 3"-4" from the ground and remove it from the garden. Bearded irises need 2 years to become fully established; the first year's bloom is not representative of their performance once mature.

A well grown iris will be the focal point of any garden. Planting examples from each class of iris will ensure you have months of enjoyment in your garden.