

The Iris



Legend and history

The word “Iris” comes from the Latin “iridis”, which in turn comes from the Greek word “Iris, Iridos” meaning “a messenger from the Gods” which relay their messages to humans in the form of a rainbow. The word became associated with the flower at the start of the 13th century due to the colour of its petals, with iridescent hues. Already considered sacred by the Egyptians, it became the symbol of royalty in France under the name “fleur-de-lis”. It appears that the use of iris as a perfume was started by Catherine de Médicis.



Botany

The iris (in French, the flower is a masculine noun, but a feminine name) is a root or bulbous perennial plant from the **iridaceae** family (like the crocus). The iris group contains some 120 species and innumerable horticultural varieties, without counting sub-types. In our gardens you find hybrid horticultural irises known as the German or bearded iris.

- The **leaves** alternate around a sheath, almost always sword-like.
- The **flower**: large grouped hermaphrodite flowers, grouped in bracts known as **spathes** (like tissue paper), then opening into six **tepaloïd tepals** that seem to be in two rows: the flower is made up of three external, horizontal **tepals** (or sepals) which support a beard and three smaller, upright, internal **tepals** (or petals).

- The **fruit** is a capsule of three compartments containing various seeds. You can dry the seeds and plant them.

The iridologist has a very particular vernacular, with no less than 23 terms, for talking about iris flowers according to the different flower colours, their shape and the plant's height. There are two categories of iris:

- Those without a beard (Louisiana iris, Siberian iris, Californian iris, blue iris, Japanese iris)
- Those with a beard, the majority of irises in our gardens, regardless of height.

The iris flower has evolved greatly over the course of the 20th century thanks to breeders: from a smaller type, narrow and soft, they have come to produce tall flowers, less fragile, in rich colours. They have also brought improvements to the flower's shape itself: wavy petals, curly, wider, harmonised the dimensions of the sepals and petals and other fantasies: rustles, spurs...The shape of the iris is not fixed; the breeders may well find a way one day to turn the spurs into true petals.

The iris in our gardens

The most common iris in our gardens, the bearded or German iris, is found in a variety of colours, from pale blue to violet/black, from white to yellow/orange/copper/chocolate brown, except red even though sometimes the spurs are a vivid and dark orange. We have a large choice with regards to the height of the plant and flowering season:

- **Iris lutescens** (rhizomatous) – 15-30 cm – March to early April
- **Dutch iris** (bulbous) – 70-100 cm – April-May
- **German iris** (rhizomatous) – 70-100 cm – end of May to early June

The duration of the flowering season obviously depends on the number of flower buds on each stem; few irises are still up at the end of summer.

Where to plant them?

- In the South, the iris will tolerate slight shade. Elsewhere, they are only happy in full sunlight, failing that in sun for half the day.
- They don't like being planted at the foot of trees or shrubs where the roots deprive them of nourishment.
- All types of soil suit the iris, but in a heavy, dense soil it is preferable to plant them on a mound of 5-15 cm after adding sand.

When to plant or move them?

- The summer months are preferable, from July to October, so as to have the time to establish themselves and have the best first flowering season.
- In the North and East, planting late from February to mid-June is not advised.
- To move them: every 3-4 years, in summer, removing the oldest, damaged, dried part of the root.

How to plant them?

- For the best results, 3.5-7 ft per tuft according to your garden, the neck of the root facing inwards, the green shoot facing towards the outside of the circle.
- The roots should not be covered with more than 1-2 cm of light soil, so that they can be seen when the soil is turned.
- The roots will be well-placed flat, covered with earth with copious irrigation.
- If you plant a lot of them, straightaway make a run-off with a hoe of 5 cm deep and 20 cm long; on one side, prick the roots and patch them.

Maintenance

- They don't like weeds, humidity or excess water: they only need water when being planted; only water them in case of drought or prolonged dry weather.
- Cut the stems 10 cm above soil level after they have flowered and don't cut the summer leaves unless they are too spotted (don't put them in the compost).
- Cut the leaves in mid-September to early October (but all theories have their shortcomings...). But what happens is you get the most beautiful season for enjoying their multicoloured flowers and their scent after the Ice Saints.

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