



West Tennessee Iris Society Growing Bearded Irises

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Where you live has a big impact on how best to plant and grow bearded irises. In different parts of the US, these guidelines may differ. However, in the Mid-South, it is important to plant shallow so sun can hit the rhizomes.

Bearded irises are native to the Mediterranean where soil is both slightly alkaline and the weather is sunny and dry.

When preparing a new iris bed,

- Position in full-sun and not at bottom of slope. Also position away from any automatic sprinklers.
- Do NOT till in sand ... it makes a concrete-like substance with our acid clay.
- Do till in vermiculite and/or hardwood mulch to loosen the soil and improve drainage.
- Do add pelletized lime. Re-apply annually.
- Do apply low nitrogen fertilizer (6-12-12) 6 weeks prior to bloom (Mid-March for Memphis) and again in June.
- Do NOT ever top-dress with any mulch or compost.
- Ensure sun can hit the rhizomes by removing weeds that create shade.

Bearded irises tend to grow exponentially and require dividing every 3 or 4 years or bloom is likely to decrease as new rhizomes get crowded out by the old, dead ones.

Since bearded irises (except re-bloomers) are summer dormant, summer (July / August) is the best time to divide. Use a garden fork and lift an entire clump. Discard all the dead (prior years) rhizomes and trim back leaves to about 12 inches.

When irises are not in bloom, it's impossible to identify them. So keeping dug rhizomes organized is essential.

- Write variety name on paper bag (never plastic) and place trimmed rhizomes in bag before digging next clump.
- Then let them heal for at least a week before re-planting.

If you have had any rot in your bed's, you can soak rhizomes in a 1:5 bleach-water solution for 5 to 10 min. Then allow them to completely dry in a shady location.

While you can plant the rhizomes directly in the ground, a summer planting in pots allows them to root and also enables you to plant them slightly above soil level in fall when weather is cooler and more comfortable.