Growing Iris in the Quad Cities

http://www.prescottirissociety.org

When Received: You can purchase either potted iris or bare root rhizomes. If purchased from PAIS in 1 gallon nursery pots, you may leave them in the pot and water them regularly or you can plant the iris immediately. When planting, try to keep the soil around the rhizome intact. This can be done by running a knife around the pot and tapping the bottom of the pot to loosen the soil from the pot. If the potted iris has a bloom stalk, you should wait until after it blooms before transplanting.

When purchased from PAIS as a bare root rhizome, remove them from the bag and place in a cool, dry place. Do not allow the rhizomes to become wet or damp. Allow air to circulate around the rhizomes. Do not refrigerate. If purchased by mail, open the shipping box immediately, remove the rhizomes and check the order. Inspect the fan of leaves on each plant. Healthy rhizomes are clean, firm, and free of disease and pests.

When to Plant: In our area it is best to plant during the Monsoon season in July or August. New roots grow in about 4 to 6 weeks and need to be established before the first frost, usually around mid-October. If desired, rhizomes may be planted in a nursery pot (1 to 3 gallons) until ready to plant in the ground.

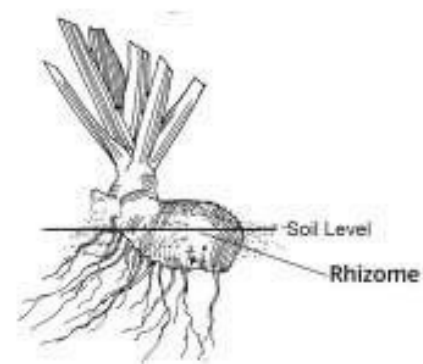
If you live in lower desert elevations you should wait to plant until daytime temperatures stay under 100 degrees, usually in September and October. Planting the dormant rhizomes can be delayed until November in warmer desert areas.

Where to Plant: Plant in well-prepared, enriched soil that has good drainage Iris need a minimum of 6 hours of sunlight per day. In lower desert areas, plant so they get morning sun and afternoon shade during the hot summer. Avoid low areas if you have a drainage problem, or use a raised bed. Be aware of invasive roots from nearby trees, shrubs and lawns.

Preparing The Soil: Examine your garden location to determine what will be required to improve the soil. Dig the native soil at least 18" deep and remove rocks and debris. Be sure to eliminate grasses, weeds or any other types of invasive plants. Fill the area to be planted with water and make sure it will drain in at least two hours. If ground is rocky or has excessive clay, you may consider constructing a raised bed.

Soil Amendments: Soil amendments improve the soil texture. They are different than a fertilizer. They break up, improve or maintain the soil's texture, improve proper water retention, and provide appropriate drainage. Adding compost builds good soil structure and is a source of many slow release nutrients. If you need to purchase compost, choose an all purpose soil conditioner and seed cover. For heavy clay soils add some gypsum. Alfalfa meal is another effective additive. Mix 25 to 50% amendments with the native soil depending on the soil condition. Mix all the ingredients thoroughly and fill the iris bed. Rake smooth and water thoroughly. Let the soil settle for a day or two. Rake the bed flat again and plant the rhizomes.

How to Plant: Tall bearded irises are planted 18" to 24" apart. You can space median varieties closer. The rhizomes are planted close to the surface. If the rhizome has some dry roots cut off all but 4". Use the roots to anchor the plant by spreading them out and covering them with soil. Pack the soil down firmly to avoid air pockets. The rhizome will grow new roots. Cover the top of the rhizome with about an inch of soil. This soil will eventually wash away leaving the top of the rhizome exposed. For an attractive clump, plant 3 rhizomes of the same variety in a triangle about 6"-8" apart. Face the fans outward from the center.



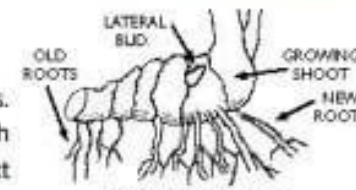
Watering: Iris have specific watering requirements for each season. Water irises immediately after planting, then once a week or so until new growth emerges from fan. This indicates that the new roots have taken hold. Too

much water before new growth begins, may invite rot. Better too little than too much water! Winter rains and snows generally provide sufficient moisture in cooler weather to sustain irises through the winter months. Irises will not begin to grow vigorously until February or March. With the onset of warmer weather, water about once a week to produce good blooms. Probe 3" into the soil to check soil moisture. If dry, water with a deep soaking. Water until summer rains begins. Too much water, combined with heat, can induce rot! Continue regular watering until cool weather arrives in the fall.

Fertilizing: Beginning in mid-February or early March, a systemic fertilizer and insecticide may be used. This may help in controlling aphids and thrips which are frequently a problem in Prescott. Fertilizer should be applied about 6 weeks before bloom. Arizona's Best fertilizer works well. About a month before bloom fertilize again using Best 6-24-24XB. Always use fertilizer with nitrogen of 10 or less (first number in the series). If plants are growing slowly, feeding intervals can be shortened.

Fertilize again just after bloom season is over as the new increases are actively growing. Plants are dormant in the summer and no feeding is necessary. Iris identified as "rebloomers" require more fertilizing midsummer to encourage fall rebloom.

Growth: The flower stalk develops at the rhizome end where the leaf fan is. New vegetative buds, called increases develop in spring and summer on both sides of the rhizome to produce new rhizomes and provide flowers for the next year.



IRIS RHIZOME

Digging, Dividing and Marking: When iris clumps become crowded and/or bloom diminishes (3 to 4 years is common), dig during July and August. Dig from the outside of the clump inward. Allow cut or broken ends of rhizome to dry or callous over before planting. Break apart rhizomes and discard those that are not healthy or have no leaf fans. Also remove and discard rhizomes with old bloom stalks. Remove dried leaves and trim leaf fans to about 6". Trim off excess roots leaving about 4" to anchor the rhizome when planting. Use a permanent marker to write the name of the variety on the center leaf. Optional – wash rhizomes in a 10% solution of bleach water, rinse well and dry thoroughly. Store as recommended until ready to plant.

Grooming and Cleaning: Keep bed free of weeds, leaf litter, and invasive roots. Remove spent blooms to prevent seed pod development unless you are hybridizing. Cut spent flower stalks at the base of the stalk. Remove dead leaves in the fall and early spring before new growth occurs. This improves air circulation and eases inspecting the condition of the rhizomes.

Clean leaf debris from around the rhizomes and remove soil from the tops of the rhizomes caused by freeze thaw. Remember the rhizomes benefit from light and air. This will also help prevent rhizome rot. If you should notice any soft rhizomes during cleanup, dig the rhizome, scrape or cut away the infected tissue and sprinkle with Ajax or a powdered cleanser that contains bleach. Allow the rhizome to dry in the sun. Replant in a different location. Disinfect your tools to prevent spreading the rot.

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