

Plant Talk - April TNLA Green 2008

Lisa Lennon
Iridaceae Family

It's springtime, so that means bulb blooming time! If you are a regular reader, you've no doubt read of my affinity of flowering bulbs (daffodils/narcissus/tulips, etc...). Well, the good, old-fashioned iris is just one more reliable, faithful group of perennials that can be grown in most areas throughout our state. The ubiquitous iris is often overlooked much of the year until spring, when it bursts full of blooms. This evergreen perennial can be practically neglected and will still bloom reliably each spring. The iris is a great perennial for borders, containers, naturalizing, and cut flowers. They are deer, rabbit and squirrel resistant. Irises grow from creeping rhizomes, or in our drier climates, from bulbs (bulbous irises).

Iris colors cover the spectrum (with the exception of true reds) from blues, yellows, orange/apricot, and soft pinks to iridescent whites. Their delicate, ruffled flowers are set off by attractive, sword-like leaves. As well as the being the scientific name, iris is also very widely used as a common name, and refers to all iris species as well as some closely related genera. Iris is in a genus of between 200-300 species – they belong to a very large family (*Iridaceae*) that includes Crocus, Freesia, and Gladiolus, among others). So in the interest of space, I will highlight this month's article on just a couple of favorite iris varieties of mine.

Dutch Iris

Dutch Iris is a hybrid of the Spanish Iris. Dutch (and English) irises have a bulbous base rather than the normal iris rhizomes. One of the first bloomers in the iris family, and blooming for several weeks in early mid spring, they are hardy and perform well in Texas. The cultivar 'Wedgwood' is an early blue flowering variety that is hard to beat in terms of reliability and hardiness. 'White Wedgwood' is also good along with 'Blue Diamond.'

Bearded Iris

Today's bearded irises have stronger stems and more blooms, a myriad of colors, and a longer bloom period than older cultivars. Bearded irises grow best in Texas north and west of US 59 (from Houston to Laredo). Since they require a definite winter season, they are usually not found further south in the Rio Grande Valley, or near the Gulf Coast.

Louisiana Iris (Iris Louisiana hybrids)

The not-to-be-overlooked water iris, the Louisiana iris, thrives in ponds or boggy areas, but does not have to be grown in boggy conditions. The beds may be ground level or above, or they may be planted in low areas that contain up to six inches of water. A sharp contrast to the Dutch or Bearded iris that needs well-drained soil to prevent root problems, Louisiana iris needs the constant moisture. Plant the rhizome about one and one-half inches beneath the topsoil and pack firmly.

Propagation:

Interesting Tidbits:

- Iris takes its name from the Greek word for the goddess of rainbow, referring to the wide variety of flower colors found among the many species.
- Iris is the state flower of Tennessee.
- For use as a cut flower, the blooms must be cut before they are fully open.