

Yard and Garden – 09-07-2013- Ted Griess / Extension Horticulture Assistant

Where have all the flowers gone, long time passing?
Where have all the flowers gone, long time ago?
Where have all the flowers gone?
Young girls have picked them everyone.
Oh, when will they ever learn?
Oh, when will they ever learn?

Written by Pete Seeger

Of late, I am reminded of the above lyrics. The song, *Where Have All the Flowers Gone*, was a popular prophetic song performed in the early 1960's by the folksong trio, *Peter, Paul and Mary*.

While tending our flower borders, Rita and I have been noticing fewer and fewer bearded iris plants. The actual flowers faded long ago since iris is a spring-blooming plant. The problem is our plants are disappearing. Bearded irises are perennials and normally increase in numbers rather than decrease. For the time being, *Where Have All My Iris Gone* might be a better title for that tune.

Much to my chagrin, I've discovered these flowers are disappearing due to *Macronoctua onusta* and not young girls having picked them. Such a strange name is the genus species name for a most destructive iris insect pest commonly referred to as iris borer.



If misery loves company, I have a hunch, we are not alone. Over the past few weeks, I have had a number of gardeners expressing similar concerns. If you grow bearded iris, you might take a closer look at your iris plants to see if they, too, are being invaded by the *Macronoctua onusta*.

Iris plants attacked by iris borer will discolor, wilt and die during late July and August. Upon close examination of infected plants, a pinkish-white, two-inch long caterpillar can be found feeding on the insides of rhizomes. Once a rhizome is injured by the borer, often a soft-rot bacterium enters the rhizome destroying the remaining tissue and creating an offensive odor.

The most effective control for iris borer is dependent upon understanding the borer's life cycle. Borers begin life as eggs laid on old iris plants in early autumn by the adult moth. Rarely is this chocolate brown moth with a two inch wing span seen because it's a nocturnal creature. In early spring, the eggs hatch. The tiny larvae crawl up the iris leaves. Near the top, they chew into the leaves. Then they eat their way down inside the leaves to the rhizomes where they gorge themselves until they reach a length of about 1 ½ to 2 inches. Borers can quickly hollow out whole rhizomes causing the leaf fans to collapse and the remaining tissue to decay.



In late summer, the larvae change into chestnut-brown pupae. By early autumn, moths emerge and start the egg-laying process.

Sanitation in late summer is critical. If you discover an iris plant with brown leaf tissue wilting, dig it up and examine the rhizomes. Discard any rhizomes containing iris borer larvae as well as those where borers have been. Divide and replant the good rhizomes.

Later this fall, after a killing frost, remove and destroy old iris leaves and stems. Good sanitation removes and eliminates overwintering eggs, thus minimizing the risk of iris borers returning next year.

In the spring, a well-timed insecticide such as Imidacloprid or Permethrin should be applied when new iris shoots are four to six inches long and a second application should be applied two weeks later. Note, if you discover your irises are not infected with borers, there is no need to use an insecticide to protect them. Maintaining good sanitation is your best line of defense.

I urge you to take a few minutes and inspect your iris. I can only hope you won't find yourself joining the chorus and singing, "*Where Have All My Iris Gone.*"