



Dividing Bearded Iris

Even though it seems like the worst time of the year to transplant anything, it is actually the best time to transplant bearded iris (*Iris germanica*). Bearded irises are some of the most common irises grown in Nebraska, and for good reason. They can be found in all colors and combinations, different heights, and even a few that re-bloom in the summer.

For the most part, bearded iris bloom in late spring (mid-May) but of course, each year is slightly different, and 2012 has been no exception! Bearded iris spread by thick, underground roots called rhizomes. These rhizomes can be found just barely below the soil, to occasionally just above the ground. They need full sun to flower properly. After about three or four years, a patch of iris has grown enough that it needs to be divided. If they are not divided, flowering will greatly decrease or stop altogether! Overcrowded iris beds are also more susceptible to insect and disease.

From mid-July to mid-September, start dividing your bearded iris that have become overgrown. First of all, cut the leaves down to about 4-6." Next, dig up the entire clump or rhizomes and knock of any loose soil. When replanting iris rhizomes, the replanted rhizome should be firm, with leaves attached, but only needs to be a couple inches in length. Cut out and throw away any piece of rhizome that appears to be rotten.

When you are ready to replant the rhizomes, smooth out the bed and organize the rhizomes by putting the tallest varieties in the back of your garden bed. Newly planted rhizomes should be placed approximately 6-8" apart. This will allow for at least a few years growth before you will need to divide the irises again. New iris rhizomes should be planted *just barely* under the soil. The most common mistake people make when planting iris for the first time is planting them too deep. Water them in well, but don't worry about fertilizing them until next spring after they flower. After they bloom, they need a dry period, so don't overwater them during this time.

Bearded iris have a strong history in Nebraska. The Sass brothers, Hans and Jacob from Germany, immigrated to Nebraska in 1884 along with their parents. They settled on a farm in Lincoln, and began hybridizing flowers at a young age. Some of the best irises introduced today can trace their parentage to a Sass iris. In fact, they were really the first hybridizers to introduce truly re-blooming iris varieties. Four of the Sass iris introductions were awarded the Dykes Medal of Honor, the highest honor the American Iris Society bestows on new iris introductions. Those four iris varieties that won are Rameses (in 1932), The Red Douglas (1941), Prairie Sunset (1943) and Ola Kala (1948). Not only did they hybridize iris, but also other plants – especially peonies.

The Greater Omaha Iris Society maintains a garden at Mahoney State Park featuring the Sass iris. For more information about their club, visit their website (<http://www.greateromahairissociety.org/>). Or, come spring, visit the Sass iris garden at Mahoney State Park!

Natalia Bjorklund is an Extension Educator for the University of Nebraska – Lincoln, serving Dodge County. Drop by the office here in Fremont at 1206 W. 23rd St, or call/email her with your horticulture questions at 402.727.2775 or nbjorklund3@unl.edu