TIME TO DIVIDE AND SHARE!

Rhizomes naturally divide and increase annually, eventually forming a complex interwoven mat. To ensure good flowering each season, the iris should be divided before this stage. Each rhizome will flower only once and then grow new rhizomes behind the current season's flower stem, or sometimes from buds along the rhizome's length. Multiplying in this way gives the plant the opportunity to access further nutrients in newer soil. The fan itself is the leading edge of the growth point and from here the plant marches outwards, away from the spent mother rhizome. Different varieties increase and grow at varying speeds, some producing a large number of increases each year, others comparatively few. After two or three years, the older rhizomes at the center of a clump become unproductive. To maintain its vigor, the plant needs to be divided and transplanted. The ideal time is after flowering, when the fleshy white rhizome visible under the leaf fan show the plant is in its growth period. If divided at this point, the plant will quickly re-establish itself, securing the rhizome firmly in the ground and enabling it to support the next tall flower stem without toppling over.

Transplanting during periods of dormancy, such as in winter, is not a good idea as the plant will have to survive on the stored resources of the rhizome. As the next period of growth is not until after flowering, it is likely that the flower stems will be shorter, and flowers smaller than normal if the iris blooms at all.

Knowing the growing patterns of bearded irises explains why July and August are the months of choice for planting these irises in cooler climates and through late fall in warmer climates. From early spring until after the flowers appear, the plants' major growth is above ground. The nutrients stored in the rhizomes are used for the growth of leaves, flower stalks, buds and flowers. Once the bloom period is past, plant growth during the next six to eight weeks concentrates on underground growth, on the development of increase buds that will become new rhizomes and on the development of new flower stalk buds for next years growing season. At the same time, the plants are storing nutrients for next year’s growth.

At the end of this underground growth period, the bearded irises are mature and, with the exception of the reblooming varieties that continue to grow throughout the warm season, will have a period of semi-dormancy. This is the best time to transplant them, when the rhizome is fully developed and while they are in their late-summer semi-dormant state. Plant at this time and the rhizomes will initiate new root growth in moist soil until hard frost. It is important that the roots of recently planted irises have an opportunity to become well established before the end of the growing season. Allowing the rhizomes to thoroughly dry out for several days or even a week will dry and callus the cut surfaces and diminish the chance of fungal diseases. A light dusting of horticultural sulfur also is a fungal deterrent.

To divide an existing clump, first dig up the whole plant using a strong garden fork, wash them off well with a hose until you have removed all dirt and can easily see where the rhizomes are attached to one another. With a sharp knife, cut through the attachments (or you can break them apart with your hands, but a sharp knife will make a smaller, cleaner wound). They should be no shorter than the length of a thumb. Inspect them thoroughly. Keep only the best new plump rhizomes with fresh, strong, green leaf fans and good root systems. Discard any rhizomes that are soft or mushy or show any other signs of disease, any that do not have viable roots, and any that are just too tiny to bother with. Many folks also discard any that have already bloomed (they will not

bloom again, though they *may* grow additional increases) -they can be composted if not diseased.. Remove any dead, spotted, or unhealthy (brown or yellow) leaves, and wipe off any insects on the remaining leaves. Cut the leaf fan back by about one-third. Snip off any dead roots but leave plump roots intact but trimmed lightly. Planting rhizomes with some roots still attached helps prevent both wind-rock and excessive moisture loss while the new roots establish themselves. As a preventative measure to avoid transmitting any plant pests or diseases to, soak the rhizomes in a solution of 1 part household bleach to 9 parts water for 20 minutes, then rinse in clear water. Dry the leaves and, using a permanent marker, write the name or description of the plant on a single, central leaf. Avoid writing across several leaves or on the outer leaves of a fan. As leaves dry, they tend to separate from each other, and the outer ones shrivel and die. After you have separated, inspected, cleaned, and labeled your rhizomes, lay them out in a shady, dry area for a couple days to allow the cut wounds to scab over and the plants to dry thoroughly. Any dampness (even moisture retained between the leaves) can result in mold and rot developing before you get them planted.



Prepare the soil, by digging a hole wide enough to take the young rhizome with outspread roots. Place it in the center of the hole on a raised hump of soil, carefully spreading the roots downwards and away from the rhizome, deep enough to secure the plant firmly. Wind-rock or movement is the worst enemy of newly planted bearded irises as the new roots can be rubbed off as soon as they emerge. Plant the rhizome with its top level with the soil surface. Fill in around the plant with the removed soil and press in firmly. Check that the rhizome is level with, or above the natural level of the soil. Water generously after planting and thereafter keep the soil slightly damp for about two weeks. Once the new roots appear, the plant will be able to withstand dry periods.

The ideal soil for irises would be 6.8, nearly neutral, but they will grow quite successfully in soils with a pH range of 6.0 to 8.0, from mildly acid to somewhat alkaline. Neutral on the pH scale is 7.0 while anything below that is acid and anything above 7.0 is basic or alkaline. The soil in Midland and the water are both alkaline, so submitting a soil test to the County Extension office to check your garden pH is advisable. We can lower our alkaline soil to the desired level by mixing aluminum sulfate, ferrous sulfate or soil sulfur into the soil at a rate of 2 pounds per 100 square feet. Wait two weeks, and then re-test the soil again. Repeat if necessary.

A sunny site and medium fertility are requirements for top bloom production. Make sure that bearded irises get at least a half day of sun. Best performance will be in full sun. In extremely hot climates, some shade late in the day will be beneficial. However, long periods of wet weather can soften and weaken the rhizome, allowing slugs or other pests a hearty meal.

During the growing season, the rhizome grows along the ground with the fan of leaves and new roots leading the way. New leaves come up in the center of the fan and the older leaves get pushed to the outside, eventually browning, falling and covering the rhizome. These decaying leaves may provide cover for slugs, snails, slaters and earwigs, as well as host spores of fungal diseases. It is wise to check the plants frequently during the summer, removing all older foliage. Leaves are the source of many nutrients for the plant and to ensure a good season to follow, leave as much healthy foliage as possible during the growing period. During the heat of summer, the rhizomes become hardened, protecting the resources within and making it difficult for pests and diseases to gain entry.

It is essential to keep the clump weed-free and not allow overgrowth by other plants. Bearded irises are not hard to keep clean.