

Receiving Irises

There are many ways of buying or receiving new irises. You may purchase them in pots, bare root, or freshly dug from the garden. What are the merits and disadvantages of each?

A field of irises in bloom is hard to resist. Or maybe a friend offers you a piece from a clump in bloom. Many irises are received this way. You obviously can see exactly what you are getting. But sadly, it may be two years before you see those blooms again. Irises usually are severely set back if dug while they are blooming and usually skip a year of bloom in order to recover. Waiting just a month usually allows them to go into summer dormancy and they then resume growth readily in the fall.

Sometimes irises are available in pots. In theory potted plants can be plunged right into their garden position any time of year. But attention needs to be paid to the soil in the pot and the soil in the garden. If there is no difference between them, no problem. But more often, the potting soil is much lighter and drains more quickly than the garden soil. If this is the case, two things may occur: the exposed surface of the pot soil may act as a wick that draws water up and out, and the pot ball gets extremely dry. When planting petunias and other bedding plants, one can avoid this by planting them a little deeper than they were growing, covering the plug top with soil. But irises (except in desert climates) do not like the rhizome covered. The second problem is that the lighter potting soil may not connect with the surrounding heavier soil. Water may not drain away after a rain and then the plant is left drowning in its own private bathtub. So, unless the potting soil and garden soil is a good match, your irises can wind up alternating between drowning or drying up depending on the day. Of course, the potting soil can be gently shaken off at planting and filled in with the indigenous garden soil. And potted plants are often the best way of receiving plants, because the iris can be kept in the pot until the best time for planting.

Potted plants are expensive to ship, so most gardeners receive bare root plants. Usually, local iris sales offer freshly dug bare root plants at the proper time for planting. These are a great way to get irises. Most growers will wash the plant roots to get all the soil off and dunk plants in a 10% Clorox solution to kill any soil pathogens. Most of the roots may

also be trimmed off or cut back. This is not a great disadvantage, because the plants actually depend on new roots for their establishment and the older roots die away.

Some roots on the rhizome can be helpful in anchoring the plant so it doesn't blow over before it establishes. This is one reason to trim back the fans, so the wind does not wiggle the rhizomes in the soil. Bearded iris planted early in fall can be well established by winter. Often it is advisable to place a brick on each rhizome to hold it in place and prevent frost heaving in the winter. Where winter weather vacillates between freezing and thawing, newly planted rhizomes may be pushed out of the soil, standing on exposed roots like stilts. In climates prone to this effect, it is advisable to keep some sand handy to put around exposed roots until they can be pushed back into the soil when it thaws.

Bare root rhizomes are the most common way of receiving bearded irises. If they have been out of the ground for some time, they may look terrible, with only a little green on the leaves at the middle of the fan. But don't despair, plants are quite resilient. The trickiest issue is getting them rooted before winter. If they get too much water before they can get back into their growth phase, they can rot. One trick is to pot them up in small pots and place them in the shade for a week or two, dampening the soil but allowing it to dry a little between dampenings. Once roots begin growing a few inches, plants can be moved into their final position in full sun. This gives more control where the new plants can be protected from continuous rain should that occur. Iris are amazing in their capacity to tolerate extremes. This short time when they are establishing is when difficulties usually occur. So, sit back now and enjoy those new irises. If you have culture questions, feel free to email me at bobpries3@gmail.com.

