



The Genus Iris

Iris are one of the quintessential spring- and early summer-flowering plants. One of the best known and loved garden flowers, the iris has been cultivated and hybridized for centuries.

Iris is a large genus of some 300 species. They are mostly rhizomatous or bulbous rooted perennials grown for their showy flowers, which can be bearded, beardless, or crested. Some species have variegated foliage. The garden irises most commonly grown in the Chicago area are rhizomatous types and may be organized into three major kinds: crested irises, bearded irises and beardless irises.

The earliest flowering types tend to be the shortest in stature. Crested iris bears charming royal blue flowers with yellow crests in late April and grows no taller than eight inches high. Crested irises grow happily in light to part shade, where they make a nice groundcover.

Other garden irises commonly grown in the Chicago area belong to either the bearded iris group or the beardless iris group. They are exactly as their name implies: with or without a “beard”, which is (if you’ll pardon the alliteration) the fuzzy feature found on the flower’s falls.

The American Iris Society classifies bearded irises into six groupings based on size: miniature dwarf, standard dwarf, intermediate, border, miniature tall, and tall.



Dwarf irises are much like a short version of the tall bearded iris but are longer-lived and pest-free. Grow dwarf iris in the rock garden or as a groundcover in sunny areas. ‘Baby Blessed’ bears light yellow and white flowers and often reblooms in fall. ‘Smart’ has striking flowers of red-violet with dark purple blotches on the falls.

Tall Bearded iris, also called German iris, are the tall showy irises seen flowering in mid-May. Tall Bearded irises requires a well-drained sunny location. Their bulky rhizomes grow partly above the soil and will rot if buried too deeply or kept too wet. Often strongly fragrant, the flowers come in a wide range of colors and show more ruffling and lacing than other iris types.

Some bearded irises are known to be "rebloomers", blooming again in late summer or fall. ‘Immortality’ (pure white flowers with a hint of silvery-blue), ‘Clarence’ (white, light blue and sky blue combination), ‘Sugar Blues’ (deep blue) and ‘Summer Olympics’ (bright yellow) may all flower again before frost if given a light feeding of low-nitrogen fertilizer in early spring and again after flowering. Watering during dry spells in the summer can keep these varieties from going dormant and may encourage them to bloom again.

Siberian iris is one of the easiest of all perennials to grow and highly recommended for the novice as well as expert gardener. These easy-going, long-lived, beardless irises are readily transplanted, very winter hardy, and will adapt to a wide range of growing conditions. Best growth occurs in moist, well-drained soil. Siberian iris blooms slightly later than the tall bearded iris and flowers well in sun or light shade.



‘Caesar’s Brother’ is one of the more striking Siberian iris varieties, growing to two and a half feet tall, bearing numerous tall stems with rich deep purple flowers. ‘Butter and Sugar’ bears delicate white flowers with butter-yellow falls. ‘Gulls Wing’ is one of the tallest varieties at two and a half to three feet tall and boasts large, pure white ruffled flowers that seem to glow in a moonlit border. ‘Jamaican Velvet’ is also quite pretty with ruffled, velvety red violet flowers atop 30-inch stems.

Japanese irises produce some of the most spectacular flowers of all. Blossoms are usually large, ruffled, flat flowers in shades of blue, pink and white and are often marbled with gray or white. They bloom about a month after the tall bearded iris and are a little more fastidious about their growing conditions, requiring a slightly acid, moist organic soil. Variegated Japanese Iris produces large purple flowers over green and cream variegated foliage, adding interest to the garden even when not in flower.

Blue and Yellow Flag iris are both ideal pond and marsh plants, preferring their roots to be at least partially submerged for the growing season.

Louisiana iris is a vigorous grower with stiff sword-like leaves of rich green. Flowers range in color from pink to yellow to oranges and gold. Native to the American Gulf Coast, they require soil that is somewhat acid and wet in the spring. The blooms are usually very wide petaled and open.

And best of all for suburban gardeners: rabbits (and deer) tend to avoid irises.



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