

Louisiana Iris



Louisiana iris is the name used worldwide for a unique group of Louisiana native iris species and, in particular, their hybrids. The plants' extraordinary beauty and reliability in the garden have made them increasingly popular, but they still deserve more recognition and use here in their home state.



Introduction

Although a number of iris species are native to Louisiana, only five species are known as “The Louisianans.” They are *Iris brevicaulis*, *Iris fulva*, *Iris giganticaerulea*, *Iris hexagona* and *Iris nelsonii*. *Iris brevicaulis* and *I. fulva* are native to the Mississippi valley from Louisiana to Ohio, and *I. giganticaerulea* and *I. hexagona* are found along the Gulf Coast from Mississippi to Texas. Only in South Louisiana, however, do all five species occur together. You typically see them growing in damp or wet areas at the edge of swamps, in boggy areas or in roadside ditches.

These five species are closely related and will interbreed with each other, but with no other species. The crossing, or interbreeding, of these species has resulted in the hybrid Louisiana iris cultivars we grow today. Their large, attractive flowers cover a wide range of colors, including many shades of blue, purple, red, yellow, pink, gold, brown, lavender, burgundy and white. Cultivars with bicolor flowers, bright yellow signal markings or ruffled petals add to their beauty.

Culture

Louisiana irises can be grown successfully throughout Louisiana and in much of the United States. Although the original species often grow in swampy or boggy conditions in their native habitats, the species and hybrids also can be grown in ordinary garden beds with excellent results. Of course, they are also outstanding planted in wet or boggy areas, grown in containers in aquatic gardens or planted in the ground at the edge of ponds. Their culture is really quite easy as long as you provide the right growing conditions and are familiar with their seasons of growth and dormancy.

The active growing season for Louisiana irises is different from most herbaceous perennials that are typically dormant in winter. Louisiana irises begin to grow as the weather cools down in October and continue to grow until April when they bloom.

After all the flowers on a stalk have bloomed, cut the flower stalk off where it emerges from the foliage. Cutting here prevents seed pod formation. Making seeds is a wasted effort unless you are breeding Louisiana irises. The energy put into making seeds is better put into strong rhizome growth and future flowers. In addition, the heavy seed pods pull the plant over causing it to flop unattractively.

By June, the irises go dormant, and some or most of the foliage turns yellow and brown. During summer dormancy, feel free to trim off the yellow/brown foliage to make the planting more attractive. Irises are usually at their most dormant (although some green foliage may remain) in August and September. Those that receive abundant moisture and those growing in aquatic

situations generally do not go as dormant as those in drier conditions, and more of the foliage stays green through the summer.

Location

Louisiana irises should be grown with as much direct sun as possible. Although they will tolerate shade for part of the day, at least six hours of direct sun will ensure the best blooming.

Three types of plantings can be considered when planting Louisiana irises in a landscape: beds containing only Louisiana irises; beds with irises mixed with other plants such as annuals, perennials and shrubs; and aquatic culture.

Beds containing only Louisiana irises can be striking. The intensely green foliage is beautiful from October through May, and when the irises bloom in March and April, the bed becomes a rainbow of colors. During summer, Louisiana irises enter dormancy, and much of their foliage turns yellow or brown, so iris-only beds are not the most beautiful sight from late June to October.

For that reason, many gardeners combine Louisiana irises in beds with other plants, such as annuals, perennials and small shrubs. When the irises go dormant, the other plants provide beauty and interest. Just remember not to crowd the irises and that the companion plants should enjoy the same growing conditions.

Aquatic culture is one of the easiest and most natural ways to grow these irises, and the foliage tends

to stay more attractive in the summer. Simply place potted iris in your pond or aquatic garden so that the rim of the pot is a few inches below the water's surface. Every one to two years, divide and repot them in heavy garden soil.

Louisiana irises are also strikingly beautiful planted on the edges of ponds, creeks or streams. The sight of blooming Louisiana irises reflected in water is one of spring's great pleasures.

Bed Preparation

Louisiana irises prefer an acid soil with a pH of 6.5 or somewhat lower. However, they are adaptable and will also grow well in soils that are slightly alkaline. A soil high in fertility and rich in organic matter will encourage vigorous growth and abundant flowers.

The first step of bed preparation is to remove any unwanted vegetation from the area and then turn the soil to a depth of about 8 inches. Sandy soils that tend to dry out rapidly should be amended with 4 inches of organic matter. Clay soils are fine for Louisiana irises, but will be improved by the addition of 2-4 inches of organic matter. Next, sprinkle a light application of a general purpose fertilizer over the area following package directions, and thoroughly incorporate the organic matter and fertilizer into the soil.

Planting and Dividing

Ideally, Louisiana irises should be planted during their relatively dormant period from August to early October. Nurseries, however, generally have few or no plants available at that time. If you do find them available, simply remove the plant from the container and plant it so that the rhizome is at or just below the soil surface. Container-grown Louisiana irises are generally planted about 1 foot apart. After the irises are planted, apply a 2- inch layer of mulch.

Louisiana irises are more commonly available at nurseries in the spring when they are in bloom. Although this is not really the best time to plant them, they will establish very reliably when planted from containers in spring. Be careful to protect the foliage and flower stalks when bringing the plants home and planting them in the garden. Blooming Louisiana irises may be top heavy and unstable when first planted. Do not allow the foliage or bloom spikes to flop over or break. If necessary, place a stake next to the plant and loosely tie it up. Established plants generally do not need to be staked.

The best time to dig, divide and transplant Louisiana irises is in late summer, August through early October.

Dividing clumps of irises is a way to control the size of the clump, invigorate clumps that have become overcrowded and propagate irises to plant in other areas or share with friends.

First, dig up a clump of irises. Locate the new rhizomes that have green foliage at their tips. These will bloom for you next year. Cut those rhizomes (generally about 6 to 8 inches long or less) from the old rhizomes that do not show new growth. Discard the old rhizomes. Replant the divisions immediately back into the bed or into containers.

If you would like to rework the bed after the irises are removed (recommended), wet down the irises and cover them to keep them from drying out. See the section on "Bed Preparation" for how to work the bed.

Replant the divisions into the reworked bed, spacing them 8 to 10 inches apart with the rhizomes at or just below the soil surface. The irises will grow in the direction they face, so keep this in mind when planting. Finally, water them in and apply a 2-inch layer of mulch.

Watering

The most critical time for watering Louisiana irises growing in beds is during their active growing season, from October through May. Fortunately, rain is generally plentiful during that time of year, and watering will not be a constant need. The most important times to water are early in the growing season, since October can be dry, and in the spring as the weather warms up and growth accelerates. April is also a typically drier month in Louisiana. Water thoroughly twice a week during extended dry periods.

It would be virtually impossible to over water Louisiana irises, but you must also take into consideration other plants growing in the same bed that would resent excessive moisture. Louisiana irises do not need to be kept constantly soggy to be happy.

Fertilizing

Louisiana irises should be fertilized with a general-purpose fertilizer in October and February. Follow package directions. Irises growing in containers in aquatic gardens should be fertilized by lifting the pot out of the water and placing aquatic plant fertilizer tablets below the soil surface.

Mulching

Mulching is an essential part of good culture. The rhizomes of Louisiana irises lie on or very near the soil

surface. During summer, the sun can shine directly on the exposed rhizomes once much of the foliage has died back. This causes a condition called sunscald that damages the rhizome and may cause it to deteriorate and rot. The tip of the rhizome will continue to grow, but it is unlikely to bloom the next season. Sunscald is one of the main reasons for failure of Louisiana irises to bloom consistently.

Keep irises growing in beds mulched with 2 to 3 inches of your favorite mulching material to prevent sunscald. The rhizomes of irises growing in aquatic situations are protected by the water over the rhizomes.

Pest Problems

Fortunately, Louisiana irises are not prone to many insect or disease pests, and when they show up, treatment is rarely critical. The two most common problems are rust and leaf miners.

Rust shows up as numerous small reddish or dark brown spots, often surrounded by a yellow margin, on leaves and stems. It generally appears in early summer after flowering, and the amount you see varies from year to year. Heavily infected leaves discolor and dieback. This disease does not appear to damage the plants severely. Since it attacks at the end of their growing season, it

doesn't affect flowering. Treatment with fungicides is possible with regular applications prior to symptoms appearing and continuing through mid-summer, but it is simply not worth the trouble. Avoid excessive fertilization with nitrogen.

Leaf miners are insect larva that feed by tunneling inside the leaf. White streaks will be observed running lengthwise through the leaf especially near the base. The outermost leaves may collapse. Although treatment is generally not needed, a systemic insecticide may be applied at the first sign of symptoms. Follow label directions carefully.

Other less common problems are caterpillars, iris borers, snails and slugs.

Caterpillars chew on new growth – control with insecticides labeled to control caterpillars on ornamentals.

Iris borers are insects that bore into the rhizome. They are more of a problem up North where bearded irises are more commonly grown. Apply a systemic insecticide in spring.

Snails and slugs may climb up the flower stalks and damage the blooms, especially under rainy conditions. Control them with commercially available iron phosphate baits.



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