

Wally's Weekly News 25th OCTOBER 2008
Written by Wally Richards.

ABOUT IRIS

The Iris is known as the Rainbow flower and is named after the Greek goddess who wore a rainbow as a gown and was a messenger of the gods.

The bearded irises receive their name because of the fuzzy beard that is on the fall of the flower.

The falls are the three petals that hang downwards and the upright petals are called standards.

There are several types of Bearded iris, the most common being the Tall Bearded, which grows to over 71cm and generally, have five to ten flowers that open over a period of time. While each flower may last for 3-4 days, the sequence of opening gives a display for about 2 weeks. When there are several spikes, they will open at different times and an overall clump will be flowering for about a month. As an extra bonus some varieties will flower earlier (or later than others), so if an area is planted with different varieties of a similar colour there can be a flowering period for about six weeks.

Median Bearded Irises grow to between 38-71cm and are ideal for windy areas, in front of the border, or smaller gardens. Their flowering period is generally just prior and overlapping the Tall Bearded irises. Standard Dwarf (20-30cm) and Miniature Dwarf (under 20cm) flower around September and October and form very colourful clumps. Perfect for tubs.

Growing bearded irises is fairly simple; the most important aspect is for them to get sun on the top of the rhizome which should be at soil level. If they become too wet they will rot and the plant will be lost.

Bearded irises can be bought from catalogues from specialised growers and they are sold as bare rhizomes in December and then again around Feb-March. The catalogues usually are available from September.

Irises can be fed in the spring as well as in autumn.

Bearded irises need a low nitrogen fertiliser as they can put on too much growth and not flower.

Sheep manure pellets with some added potash is good value.

The flowers are developing and opening at this time of the year. The leaves can be prone to rust and a **Liquid Sulphur** spray can be used to help keep the rust away, luckily this does not affect the blooms.

If the stem is leaning over it is advisable to stake to prevent the blooms being damaged, or the stalk snapping.

One variety of iris that enjoys the wet are the Louisiana which are native to the south Eastern areas of USA and are found nowhere else in the world. The colour range is vibrant and size of the flower varies from 7-18cm across. They can be grown in containers, normal gardens and shallow water. An acid soil is required and they thrive with plenty of feeding and sun. Irises that prefer the damper conditions usually prefer an acidic type fertiliser and TB prefer alkaline soils, so they can also be dressed with lime. Dutch Irises that can readily be bought through garden centres are the bulbous varieties that are in stock in early autumn. The most well known variety is the Dutch Iris, which is

used year around by florists and flowers in the garden in early spring. The tiny Reticulata Iris can also be purchased at this time but is not as easy to grow on in future years. Japanese and Siberian Irises are often available at garden centres at this time of the year. The only place I know where Pacific Coast Irises can be purchased is through the Seed Pool of the Iris Society. The Seed Pool also includes many other Iris Species along with other Iridaceae- there are over 200 species.

Members of the NZ Iris Society will be very happy to advise on where to purchase Irises, we will have named potted Irises for sale at the show.

The Palmerston North Iris Society is having an Iris Show on the 1st and 2nd November at the Leisure Centre P. Nth. There will be a wide range of irises available and every one is welcome to attend. The Show is being hosted by Wairarapa, Wellington and Rangitikei Branches and they hope to have a good selection of irises on Show, the predominance will be the Tall Bearded.

For those that cannot attend see www.nziris.org.nz (The official web site for any other information.)

HOW TO MAKE COMPOST

Composting is a great way to discard yard waste and kitchen scraps. In many cases, it's more economical than paying to have these wastes hauled away. And you can improve the health of your soil by adding the compost to your garden or yard.

To construct a composting area, determine the size. A large compost pile will insulate itself and hold the heat of microbial activity. Its center will be warmer than its edges. Piles smaller than 3 feet cubed (27 cu. ft.) will have trouble holding this heat, while piles larger than 5 feet cubed (125 cu. ft.) don't allow enough air to reach the microbes at the center. These proportions are of importance only if your goal is fast, hot compost. Slower composting requires no exact proportions."

First, remove the grass and sod from the designated area. This allows decaying materials direct contact with soil microorganisms.

- * First layer: about 3-4 inches of chopped brush or other coarse material on top of the soil surface to allow air circulation around the base of the heap.

- * Second layer: About 6-8 inches of mixed scraps, leaves, grass clippings or sawdust. Materials should be "sponge damp."

- * Third layer: One inch of soil serves as an inoculant by adding micro-organisms to the heap.

- * Fourth layer (optional): About 2-3 inches of manure will provide the nitrogen needed by micro-organisms. Sprinkle lime, wood ashes and/or **BioPhos** over the layer of manure to reduce the heap's acidity. Add water if the manure is dry.

- * Fifth layer: Repeat steps 1-4 until the bin is almost full. Top off the heap with a 4-6 inch layer of straw and scoop out a basin at the top to catch rainwater.

Your compost heap should reach temperatures between 120 and 140 degrees Fahrenheit in four to five days. The pile should then begin to settle-a sign the heap is working properly.

After five or six weeks, move materials into a new pile and turn the contents so that the outside of the old heap is now the center of the new heap. Add water if necessary.

Your compost should be ready to use in three to four months. For spring compost, start a heap in late autumn. For fall compost, start a pile in early spring. The more often you turn

the pile, the faster you will have compost. Check the internal temperature regularly and if it changes substantially (usually after about a week), turn the pile.

You'll know when your compost is done "baking" because it will be dark brown, crumbly and earthy-smelling. Be sure to let it stabilize for a few extra days and screen it through a half-inch screen if you want a finely textured material.

Problems ring me at 0800 466464 (Palmerston North 3570606)