



# Uncanoonuc Mt. Perennials

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## An Introduction to Garden Iris

The genus *Iris* includes flowers in all the colors of the rainbow and was named after Iris, the Greek goddess of the rainbow. Some *Iris* grow from bulbs, but the groups described below have rhizomes which are underground storage stems that produce true roots below and foliage and flowers above. Their leaves are folded over each other at the base and form flattened clusters called fans. The flower parts are composed in sets of three. There are three inner petals, the standards, which are usually held erect and three outer petals, the falls, usually held out or down.

### Crested Iris

*Iris cristata*, the crested iris, has a rugged constitution that belies its diminutive stature and delicate good looks. Native to the southeastern United States, crested iris are hardy to Zone 3. A woodland plant in the wild, they are adaptable to shade, partial shade or, with ample moisture, to full sun. They prefer slightly acidic, fairly rich, moist but well-drained soil. The net of slender, shallow rhizomes with fibrous roots below, make the plants drought resistant once established. Propagate by division anytime after bloom has finished, setting the rhizomes just under the soil surface.

Crested iris form drifts of flat, spiky, arching, lime-green foliage six to nine inches high. The flattish, lavender-blue flowers are highlighted with a golden crest and hover near the top of the foliage. This enchanting show unfolds May into June, after which the foliage remains attractive through the season. Crested iris look right at home in the border, rock garden or woodland.



Several cultivars are available. The White Crested Iris is a sparkling white with a bright gold crest. 'Eco Bluebird' is a strong grower, thicker and more robust than the species with deeper blue flowers and orange crests. Pests and Diseases: Slugs

### Bearded Iris

The bearded or German iris, is an enormous group of plants with a myriad of cultivars to choose from. Bearded iris thrive in full sun and fairly rich, moist, well-drained, slightly acid soil. Dappled shade for part of the day is acceptable. They are hardy to Zone 3. Divide bearded iris in August every three years or so to keep them young and flowering heavily. Lift the entire plant, reduce the foliage to 6" inches or so high and using a sharp knife or clippers cut the young, plump rhizomes away from the edges of the clumps. Discard the spongy, exhausted rhizomes at the center and any that show sign of insect or disease. Each division should have one to three fans of foliage emerging from it. Replenish the bed with organic matter and set the plants about 12" apart with half an inch of soil over the rhizomes.

Bearded iris have flat, very broad, sword-like foliage. The effect is bold. The magnificent, domed flowers appear on branched flower stalks that rise above the foliage. The effect is magical. Most of the popular tall bearded iris grow 3 - 3-1/2' high. They are old-fashioned favorites for the cottage garden or mixed border. Bearded iris bloom May to early June, in every color and mix of colors - except true red - imaginable. The forms also vary widely. They may be almost tailored or fringed or ruffled in varying degrees. Often sweetly scented, they all have a caterpillar-like growth of dense hair at the inner edge of the falls, a landing strip for pollinating bees and the origin of the common name, bearded iris. Pests and Diseases: Iris borer, bacterial root rot, leaf spots

(continued on back)

## Variegated Sweet Iris

*Iris pallida* 'Variegata' or 'Zebra', the Variegated Sweet Iris, is a striking addition to the garden. Growing 2-1/2 - 3' high it produces candelabras of light purple, bearded flowers with a distinct grape-like fragrance in June. The real draw is the foliage, fans of sword-like, grey-green boldly striped with cream and yellow. Grow it as you would the bearded hybrids.

## Japanese Iris

The modest Asian native, *Iris ensata*, is now available in a large array of breathtaking Japanese iris cultivars. Hardy to Zone 4, they thrive in full sun and will tolerate light shade. Japanese iris require rich, acid, moist soil. Given these basic requirements they are not hard to grow. Japanese iris should be rejuvenated by division every three or four years in spring or fall. We work with ours in September. Lift the clumps, reduce the foliage to 6" or so, cut into desired size - single fans to increase numbers, five to seven or more fans to ensure bloom the following season. Any damaged rhizomes or roots should be trimmed and the soil enriched with generous amounts of organic matter. Reset the plants 1-1/2 - 2' apart with the top of the rhizomes 2" below the soil surface. New roots form above the old, and shallow clumps would soon grow loose and vulnerable to environmental stresses including winter heaving.

The foliage of Japanese iris is very narrow and upright, bright green with a center rib. Height varies, but most are in the 2-1/2 - 3' range. The huge (6 - 10" across), flat flowers unfurl above the foliage in July. A striking addition to any garden, they look especially opulent planted waterside. The flowers may be single or double and colors range from every shade of blue and purple to whites and creams, pinks and near red. The blossoms may be all one color or a mixture of colors, ruffled or not, with textures ranging from satin to velvet. This sounds busy, but the effect of Japanese iris in bloom is always quiet elegance. Pests and Diseases: Thrips

## Siberian Iris

*Iris sibirica*, the Siberian iris, are hardy to Zone 3. Breeding has resulted in much dressier varieties than the species without loss of its vigor or charm. Siberian iris prefer full sun but will do well with dappled shade part of the day. They are adaptable, tolerating varying soil conditions, but are at their best in rich, moist, slightly acid soil. Siberians benefit from division every four or five years, letting you know it is time by a decline in flowering and/or by exhibiting the "donut effect," an opening up of the center of the clump. Like daylilies, Siberian iris can be divided pretty much anytime the ground isn't frozen. Spring, just as the plants break dormancy, or early fall are best. See the notes on dividing Japanese iris, setting the Siberian rhizomes the same depth they were growing before.

Siberian iris foliage is grass-like growing in graceful, vase-shaped clumps. It is dark green, often assuming an attractive golden color in the fall. Their narrow, strongly vertical habit makes a welcome counterpoint to frothy or bold foliage and flowers of other plants. Height is determined by variety, but most are in the 2-1/2 - 3' range. The June bloom produces 4 - 5" flowers in all shades of blue, purple, cream and white with newer varieties extending your choice to include pinks, near reds and yellow. Gracefully held above the foliage, they exhibit exciting variations in color, texture and form. Siberian iris are beautiful, easy and have season long interest. Hard to beat. Pests and Diseases: Iris borer

### Blue Flag Iris

Iris versicolor, the Blue Flag Iris, native to wet soils across most of eastern North America is hardy to zone 4. Vigorous clumps of grass-like foliage reach anywhere from 2 - 4' high. Soil moisture is the determining factor. Adaptable, the blue flag thrives in a bog or a border, in full sun or partial shade. In a naturalized setting division would probably be necessary seldom, if ever. In the garden, division every three to five years will keep the plants thrifty and in scale with its neighbors. See the section on Siberian Iris above for more information on division. June gives rise to stems of pretty two to three inch violet flowers touched with yellow. Deadhead unless self-sowing is desired. The blue flag iris has an iron-clad constitution and an unassuming gracefulness. Pests and Diseases: None

### Reblooming Iris

There is a group of bearded iris (as well as a handful of Siberian and Japanese iris) known as remontants or rebloomers. Most thrive in much milder climates than New England. See the Reblooming Iris Society website. ([www.rebloomingiris.com](http://www.rebloomingiris.com))

### Additional Information

*For recommendations on dealing with pests and diseases of Iris contact:*

*UNH Cooperative Extension  
The Family Home & Garden Education Center  
1-877-398-4769*

*For further information about Iris of all kinds contact:*

*The American Iris Society  
[www.irises.org](http://www.irises.org)*

