

Niagara College Greenhouse & Nursery Success Sheet No. 26

Iris

History

Many thousands of years ago, the Greeks would plant a purple iris on women's graves. It was said that the iris symbolizes the rainbow, from the Greek goddess named Iris.

In 1147, Louis VII of France adopted the purple iris and named it the fleur-de-lis. It then became the symbol on the banner of France.

By the nineteenth century, the iris flower became the emblem of Florence, Italy. Today the fleur-de-lis is the emblem of the city of New Orleans, Louisiana.

Description

This large genus, *Iris*, has more than 200 species, all valued for their beautiful and distinctive flowers. Each flower has six petals: three outer petals called "falls," which droop away from the center and alternate with the inner petals, called "standards."

There are two main groups, the first group being classified as the rhizomatous. It includes the bearded, beardless and crested irises. They have sword-shaped leaves in a fan-like arrangement. These irises bloom from May to June. They are very frost hardy and prefer a sunny location in the garden.

The second group is classified as the bulbous. Irises of this group will grow in a few places on the Pacific coast; otherwise, most do not flourish in gardens. Bulbous

irises are beautiful flowers widely grown by florists and are available in many colours.

Planting

Irises need at least a half day of sunlight, and a good drainage system is required. When planting irises, expose the tops of the rhizomes to sunlight and place them about 12 to 18 inches apart.

Newly planted rhizomes need moisture to establish a good root system. The soil should stay damp for six weeks after planting. Once established, they are relatively drought tolerant.

Fertilizing

To keep your irises looking healthy, a fertilizer of 10-10-10 or 15-15-15 can be used twice a year. The first time it can be used is in mid April, and the second time is after bloom, from late May to early June.

Propagation

Irises can be increased by division of the rhizomes or offsets in the late summer, by digging up part of the rhizomes and placing them somewhere else within the garden. Another way irises can be increased is by taking the ripe seeds from the blossoms and sowing them right in the sandy soil in the fall.

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