

GET GROWING

July and August are months to see to your irises

Divide them to spread the wealth and check for invading borers

By MARY PIRAINO

This elderly garden club lady was sitting at her kitchen table drinking coffee at daybreak and looking out the window at her garden. What caught my eye were the tall stalks of the iris plants and how they should be cut down before seeds grew on them from the bygone blooms.

I once tried to grow iris from seeds but was not successful. If they are left on the stalks, they take the strength from the plants.

As I sat there sipping my coffee, I thought about when I was young, and pictured my mother's garden with the many clumps of the common purple iris that everyone had in their yards. I still have some in my garden that I took from my mother's house, and cherish them. In the garden club, we call plants like this "heirloom plants."

As time went by, growers started to hybridize iris and my mother purchased a pure white one, which was the prize of her garden. It was like the big cattleya orchids florists use for corsages. No one was allowed to touch or cut it; it was the prize of her garden.

Today, there are so many

beautiful varieties and colors of iris. Bearded Iris are the most commonly grown varieties and the "parents" are natives from around the world.

There are many different varieties of Bearded Iris. They include:

- Self, a flower with solid uniform color.
- Plicata, a white or yellow with mottling.
- Bi-color, which has standards (the top, erect petals) of one color and falls (the lower, downward-swooping petals) of another.
- Bi-tones, which have standards of one color and falls of a value of the same color.
- Blends, which are varieties with two or more colors.

The gray-green leaves of iris plants are fan-like. Garden club members like to use these leaves in flora designs because they hold up well in water and add different lines to the designs.

Iris plants spread underground by rhizomes and develop large clumps, which need to be divided. I can remember when I would work in my garden from sun-up to sun-down; now I cannot divide these clumps without help, and thought I'd ask some of the younger garden club members to help me. In exchange, I'd give them some of the divisions to enjoy.

July and August are good months to dig and separate

bearded iris. Plant iris in a sunny spot in a light soil. If the soil is clay, add humus and very coarse sand (not beach sand).

Bone meal and a good garden fertilizer, low in nitrogen, are good for irises. Manure may be used, but only if it has aged for about a year.

When planting divided rhizomes, the roots must be buried firmly to hold the plant in place — but the rhizome should be near the surface. An easy way to do this is to dig two trenches with a ridge between them, placing the rhizome on the ridge and spreading the roots carefully in the trenches. Be sure to firm the soil, then fill the trenches with soil, letting the top surface of the rhizome be just barely beneath the surface of the soil. Soon after the planting, the irises will grow roots which will help to hold the plant firmly during the winter.

When checking out your iris beds, look for borers and destroy any plants that have them. Borers are grubs that are partial to Siberian iris and will invade a patch if you aren't vigilant.

The first step is to dig up the rhizomes and cut out the borers, discarding any badly damaged rhizomes. Cut back leaf fans on the remaining rhizomes to two to three inches before replanting, and be sure to rake the soil to remove bor-

IT'S TIME TO DIVIDE THOSE IRISES



Mary Piraino, 76, of Dongan Hills, digs up overgrown irises in need of division.



The seeds in the pod of an overgrown iris can be saved, but most likely will be discarded.

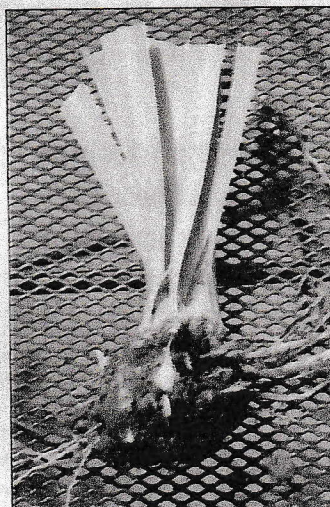


STATEN ISLAND ADVANCE PHOTOS/MICHAEL McWEENEY

Mrs. Piraino pulls irises apart near the root separating the rhizome.



Here she trims the iris leaves into a fan shape after separating the rhizome.



The newly separated and trimmed iris is now ready for planting.

ers that may have already have left the plants and begun laying eggs.

There are many varieties of iris such as; Siberian iris, Pacific Coast Iris, Japanese Iris, Iris with variegated foliage and dwarf wild Iris. Among the new varieties are re-bloomers, which bloom in spring and again in fall.

All this writing of irises has made me very sentimental about my own and left me wanting more of them to share. So, I went to my computer and checked out the sale of all the beautiful Iris at www.american-medows.com and made a wish list for planting at the end of summer.

If irises intrigue you, plan a day trip next May or June to the Presby Memorial Iris Gardens, adjacent to 474 Upper Mountain Ave. in Upper Montclair, N.J. At this spectacular hillside living museum, visitors can see, up close, the many varieties of irises, and order rhizomes for pickup at the end of July.

Rhizomes are only available if they are ordered in advance.

Another source for iris is Schreiners Gardens in Oregon which has a lovely catalog showcasing the latest iris selections. They can be reached at Schreinersgardens.com.

GARDEN NOTES

Did you know that each of the six garden clubs on Staten Island contributes to the beauty of our Island all during the growing season by planting, watering, weeding and caring for a variety of small gardens?

Are you aware that the first president of the Staten Island Garden Club was Alice Austen, and that this club plants and maintains a garden at the site of her beloved Clear Comfort at the foot of Hylan Boulevard every year? Annie Lee Wightman, a longtime member of this club and experienced horticulturalist, has chaired this project with her committee and keeps it well maintained.

The Richmond Evergreen Garden Club, under the direction of past president, Carolyn Pinto, maintains the perennial and annual gardens at the Amundsen Circle Park in Oakwood, where Amboy Road and Wilder Avenue meet.

One of the Great Kills Garden Club's many projects is the Seaside Nature Garden at the foot of Nelson Avenue. Although the garden is not accessible to the public right now, due to major construction of a new boardwalk and enlargement of the park area, the perennial garden is colorful from April until fall.

In your own gardens your outdoor chores should include pruning your roses, "dead-heading" your annuals and perennials to encourage more bloom, staking floppy perennials, weeding and watering.

Mary Piraino is a member of the Great Kills Garden Club and Past Director of First District Federated Garden Clubs of New York State.
