

BEARDED IRIS RHIZOMES ~ PLANTING IN THE FALL

This article will be helpful to everyone who wants to plant Bearded Iris rhizomes in the late summer/early fall and is worried about them developing roots and getting established in time for the cold winter months ahead. They are usually available potted up in the spring through garden centres but the best selection and prices are available by buying the mature rhizomes in the late summer/early fall. The rhizomes available at the end of the summer are coming from mature settled plants and are hardier than rhizomes available in the spring. If you are from a colder zone, there are some things you can do to ensure they survive the winter months and go on to flower beautifully in your garden.

It's crucial for Bearded Iris rhizomes to get into the ground early because in order for them to flower next spring, they need to be planted close to the surface of the soil, with the sun able to hit the rhizome. This makes them unlike other fall plantings as they are exposed to all that Mother Nature has to throw at them during the winter months! To help them make it through the winter you need to follow some fairly simple steps.

First you need to find a sunny location in your garden, which means, at least 6 hours of sunlight a day. The area has to have great drainage, and cannot be in a runoff location, this is crucial, as rhizomes will rot if they sit in excessive moisture they cannot use or that cannot drain away quickly enough. Work the soil really well, to a depth of 10 to 12 inches. With heavier soil it is really beneficial to add some sand or other material in to lighten it and allow for better drainage. You can add a small amount of bone meal to the bottom of the hole but do not add fertilizers to new plantings as they can burn or otherwise damage new roots. Fertilizing can take place very early next spring or very late the following fall. Any fertilizing should be light and fertilizers with high nitrogen should not be used as they can promote rot issues.

Once you have the perfect spot picked out and prepared you need to dig a hole large enough for the size of the rhizome. In the centre of this, mound the dirt into a hill, make it almost as tall as the hole itself and then place the rhizome on top of the hill. Pull the dirt up to and over 2/3 of the sides of the rhizome and then press hard to keep it firmly in place. Water the area well and then water it regularly to get the roots stimulated and starting to sprout. Keep the newly planted rhizomes moist, but not wet, until strong growth is apparent.

Mulching

During the last couple of years we have all experienced major thaw periods in mid winter and they seem to be due to climate changes that are here to stay. These mid-winter freeze-thaw times are particularly damaging to newly planted Iris rhizomes and can cause the close to the surface rhizome with just small new roots, to heave out of the soil. Heaving of the rhizome can allow cold air and moisture under it that can lead to freezing and rot.

Good mulch has to be non compacting, because if it compacts down it can rot and then cause rhizome rot. Some good choices are sand, compost or dry leaves like Oak and Beech, that will not pack down and turn slimy, preventing good air circulation. All mulches should be applied after the ground freezes. Many growers recommend that you place a brick or a rock on top of the mulch as well to hold the rhizome firmly down.

So these are some of the choices, but whatever coverings you decide on, you need to REMOVE them in early spring before new growth begins. Failure to do so will stop the sun from reaching the rhizome and also optimal air circulation will not be reached and you risk not seeing a flower in that spring or worse, the rhizome rots and are mush by the time you remember to remove the mulch.

Potting up Bearded Iris for the Winter

Your best bet is to plant them in the ground early enough to develop the roots they need to sustain themselves through the winter, but if you happen to find that perfect variety and it's really too late for that then one solution is to plant them in pots for the winter. To do this you have to be sure the pot has great drainage and loose, aerated soil. Plant as you would in the garden by digging a hole in the potted dirt and then mounding some dirt in the middle of that hole. Place the rhizome on top of the mound and press the soil firmly up and over the roots but leaving the top of the rhizome exposed.

Water well and then place the pot outside in the sun and elements until you know there will be a hard frost. Be sure to continue watering during this time to promote new root growth. As soon as the harsh weather appears, the pot should be moved to a cold dark spot, like a garage or a basement area, where it can remain throughout the winter. You should water it occasionally to keep the root from completely drying out.