

Dividing Iris

Nearly every yard in Kansas contains bearded irises. Irises are well suited to this area as they can tolerate poor soils and severe drought conditions. Their beautiful flowers, that come in so many different colors, often appear around Mother's day. For the most part, these plants are a low-maintenance addition to any flower bed, but every 3-5 years irises do need to be divided.

Dividing irises helps to rejuvenate the plants and increases the floriferousness (amount of flowers) for the following year. These fast multiplying rhizomes—the bulb portion of the iris is called a rhizome—create large clumps in your flower bed in just a few years. These clumps will flower primarily along the edge, with the middle of the clump having few to no flowers. Once you see this occurring in your bed, you'll know it's time to divide your irises.

Mid-July and early August are the ideal times to divide iris rhizomes. If you were to divide your irises in early spring, they would lose their blooms for that year. If you divide soon after blooming, it can result in a loss of blooms for the following year. In mid-July or August, the iris is dormant and if divided at this time, will most likely bloom the following year.

The rhizomes of the iris grow just below the soil surface, making digging much easier than some plants. When you exhume the plant, shake off the excess soil so you can examine the roots. You will see that the plant has thick, fleshy rhizomes along with small feeder roots. As you look at your clump, look for sections of rhizomes that have a fan of leaves growing from them. With a sharp knife, or with your hands, break off sections of rhizomes that have a fan of leaves attached to them. Each of these sections is a viable plant that can be replanted in your garden. The rhizomes without fans attached can be discarded. One of the hardest things for gardeners to do is to throw things away—especially plants, but don't dismay, your healthy iris will propagate itself many more times over the years.

If some of the sections you break off have two fans, those are great to plant as well. These larger sections will bloom more than the smaller pieces but will need to be divided sooner than the single fan pieces.

If any pieces of rhizome have holes (iris borer) or are soft and mushy, throw them away! It can be possible to treat soft rot and iris borer but in many cases there are so many healthy rhizomes to choose from that it is not worth your time.

As you replant your new iris pieces, first prepare the soil. Remove weeds and fertilize according to your soil test. If you don't have recommendations from a soil test, you can apply a complete fertilizer (10-10-10 for example) at a rate of 1 pound per 100 square feet. The fertilizer should be incorporated into the soil at a depth of 6". If this area has been heavily fertilized in the past, consider using something with less phosphorus, which is the second number listed on the bag.

Plant your iris rhizomes shallow in the soil. Make sure the small feeder roots are in contact with the soil with the rhizome only lightly covered or peeking out above the soil. Often the feeder roots naturally lay out to one side with the rhizome facing the opposite direction.

For aesthetic purposes, plant rhizomes in a circle using an odd number of plants in each spot. You may plant a circle of three in one area with a circle of five in another spot in your garden. Plant the rhizomes a few inches away from each other so that they have room to expand.

If you'd like to see a video on how to divide iris, please visit our website: <http://www.shawnee.k-state.edu/lawn-garden/education.html>