

**Friday's Feature**

**By**

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September 20, 2009

### **Multiply Louisiana irises by dividing**

The most beautiful irises for Northwest Florida gardens are called Louisiana irises. These plants originated in America and are well adapted to the soils and climate along the Gulf Coast.

John James Audubon was apparently the first to use the name "Louisiana iris" to describe the beardless irises growing wild in the warm and wet environment of the Louisiana swamps. Early French explorers to the Gulf of Mexico called the Louisiana iris "les glis de marais" or "glads of the marsh".

Louisiana irises are derived from five species, most of which are native to a limited area of south Louisiana and the Gulf Coast marsh areas between Texas and Florida. They include *Iris giganticaerulea*, *I. fulva*, *I. brevicaulis*, *I. nelsonii* and *I. hexagona*. Only in Louisiana are all five species found. They are closely related and will interbreed with one another.

It is this ability to interbreed that has produced a wide range of colors, heights and blossoms. Virtually every color of the rainbow is found in the flowers of these iris species.



Louisiana irises are very easy to grow. They thrive in ditches, bogs, along pond edges, or in garden beds that stay moist and fertile. When planting in water, place the root ball no deeper than six inches below the water surface. They prefer acidic soil with lots of organic material.

Each year, Louisiana irises grow and spread, creating more underground rhizomes and shoots. Eventually, the plants may become crowded, which can lead to poor flowering. Dividing will help keep the clump the size you want and prevent the irises from taking over areas where they were not intended to grow.

Louisiana irises can be divided and transplanted anytime from August through mid-October. Unlike most plants, Louisiana irises are at their most dormant stage in the late summer, making now the ideal time to divide them. You might have noticed how many brown or yellow leaves are on your plants.

The first step is to use a shovel or garden fork to lift the Louisiana iris plants from the bed. Try to get as much of their root systems as possible, and do not damage the fans of new growth at the ends of the rhizomes. Put them aside in a shady area, and hose them down to keep them from drying out.

To decide where to divide your irises, look over the clumps carefully. You will see that young rhizomes branch off from the older rhizomes. The younger rhizomes have a fan of green leaves at their tips with roots growing out from the rhizome at the base of the leaves. Break or cut off the young rhizomes at the point where they branch off from the old rhizome. Discard the old rhizome, and replant the young rhizomes.

Plant the rhizomes horizontally with the fan of foliage facing the direction you want the plant to grow, and carefully cover all of the roots. Space the rhizomes about 1 foot apart. The top of the rhizome should be just below or barely show above the soil surface. Mulch the bed about 2 inches deep, and water thoroughly.

If the weather should become dry this fall, winter or spring, water the irises once or twice a week to keep the plants well-supplied. An application of fertilizer in February will keep the plants growing vigorously into the blooming season.

Southerners who have been disappointed with the performance of the popular bearded irises or Japanese iris will be delighted with these beardless beauties.

Theresa Friday is the Environmental Horticulture Extension Agent for Santa Rosa County. The use of trade names, if used in this article, is solely for the purpose of providing specific information. It is not a guarantee, warranty, or endorsement of the product name(s) and does not signify that they are approved to the exclusion of others.

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