

Dutch Irises

Of all the irises, Dutch irises are one of the favourites of the spring flower display, being both hardy and easy to grow, and available in a wide range of colours. Their flowers are unsurpassed for cutting and last for up to two weeks in the vase.

They were bred by Dutch flower growers from species Spanish irises. Also used as a parent was the Moroccan iris, *I. tingitana*, which has given the Dutch iris family its strong blue and violet shades as well as an early flowering time. Further hybridising work has resulted in the extensive colour range available today, much wider than that of the Spanish or English irises.



Dutch irises are the earliest to flower in September and October, and they are followed by the Spanish and lastly the English irises, which can flower almost up to Christmas.

As their ancestors were native to Mediterranean regions, Dutch irises prefer a sunny, well-drained position in the garden. They are reasonably hardy, although the soft flower buds can be damaged by hard frosts. They should be planted 8 to 10 cm deep in early to mid autumn. Soil should be worked up well to a depth of 15 cm, with a little fertiliser worked in as you go. Fresh animal manure should not be used, as it tends to promote plenty of lush leaf growth with few flowers. Good compost is always beneficial.

The new leaves will appear from May onwards. Once temperatures are rising in the spring and growth is faster, it is advisable to spray now and again to control aphids. Unchecked, these can spread virus, causing stunted growth. In humid conditions, fungal diseases can become established. A general-purpose spray such as is sold for roses would be suitable for irises.

If picking the flowers for indoor use, do so when the bud has emerged, but before it is fully open. The buds will continue to open indoors from this stage and there will often be a second bud, which will emerge as the first begins to die back.

The bulbs can be left undisturbed in the garden for several years, and will often flower better in their second or third year when they have become more established. Eventually, they will begin to produce more leaves and fewer flowers as they become overcrowded, and they should then be lifted. Wait until the leaves die back in summer before digging the bulbs in January. Dry the bulbs in a warm airy place but keep them out of direct sun. Once they are dry, separate the offsets from the larger bulbs and remove old skin and roots.



Store the bulbs in a cool, airy place until replanting in autumn. The offsets will generally not flower in their first year as they need to build up more reserves, but will flower well from the second year onwards.