

Plant "Imagination"

This month we are fortunate to have an excellent article by Soni Forsman. Soni is a member of our sister club MWGS and has spoken at our club in the past. Soni, and her husband Dave have shared their beautiful gardens many times. When I asked if she would be willing to write an article for our newsletter she graciously accepted.



Hardy iris for wet sites

Text and photos by Soni Forsman (forslilly@aol.com), Minnesota Water Garden Society

Aquatic irises are not just for water gardens. They tolerate various depths of water – from about three inches over the crown of the plant to soil that retains moisture – making them good choices for rain and bog gardens and soggy areas of the landscape. If they are given extra water, they will even grow in perennial gardens. In addition to moisture, their only other requirement is lots of sun, six hours or more.

Available in many colors, water irises grow 18-inches to three-plus feet tall, depending on the variety. All are beardless. The erect center petals are called the standards, the outer petal-like sepals are the falls and the contrasting colored areas near the base of the falls are called signals.

Each iris variety has a relatively short bloom period, two to three weeks, in late spring/early summer. Growing several species and/or cultivars together may extend the bloom time of a grouping. When not in bloom, the stout sword-like foliage contrasts with the foliage shapes of the surrounding plants.

There are two general categories of iris that like to grow in moist conditions. The true water iris prefers very moist to wet growing conditions year around. The second group of iris like wet soil for part of the growing season but prefer drier conditions the remainder of the year.

Most familiar of the water irises are the blue flag (*Iris versicolor*), the southern blue flag (*I. virginica*) and the yellow flag (*I. pseudacorus*). Water irises that bear the ‘flag’ name grew (grow) in the shallow areas of streams, signaling where early travelers could safely cross. Japanese irises (*I. ensata*) and Siberian irises (*I. sibirica*) are in the second group – extra moisture in the late spring/early summer drier conditions later.

The **blue flags** are native to North America, growing from the northeast to the midwest and from Canada to Texas. *I. versicolor* is hardy to zone 3 while *I. virginica* grows to zone 4. The northern blue flag grows to 30 inches while the southern one can reach 36 inches. There are named cultivars of these species and most bloom in colors other than blue.

The **yellow flag** is native to Europe, the British Isles and North Africa but has spread worldwide. This non-native is a prolific seeder and should not be planted in or near a lake or stream and is probably not a good choice for a rain garden constructed to filter runoff before it reaches a city/county lake. It is hardy to zone 4 and grows up to four feet. There are also named cultivars of this species.

Water irises in rain or bog gardens require minimal care except deadheading to keep the non-natives from dispersing their seeds and removing any dying foliage. Iris growing in a ‘private’ bog or rain garden can be fertilized in the spring. Rain gardens near curbs are expected to take nourishment from the runoff.

Divide iris when they have either grown out of their assigned space or look in need of a makeover or both. This should be done after they flower and by mid-August. For the flag irises, dig up the clump(s) and separate the rhizome into fans of at least five leaves with roots. To help the new divisions reestablish, trim back the leaves to six inches and the roots to four or five inches. Replant! No special winter care is needed except to cut the foliage back when cleaning the rain or bog garden before the snow flies.

True water irises can be used in water gardens, adding color and height to the edges. They can be planted in the margins or grown in containers placed on a shallow shelf. Iris growing in containers will need to be repotted every few years, following the above directions. They can winter in their summer location.

Water irises emerge early in the spring, signaling winter is in retreat. *Thank you, Soni*

