



Dividing Iris Rhizomes

If you're new to caring for irises, you may have heard people talk about **dividing** them. As a cultivated plant, irises require regular human intervention in order to continue to grow and produce. Thankfully, irises are generally regarded as **easy to grow**, long-lived, and come in a variety of colors.

Dividing irises is typically required **every three to five years** to make space for new irises by removing old irises. This also helps prevent iris borer and soft rot issues.

Rhizomes, Bulbs, and Roots

It's important to make sure your irises have rhizomes. Not everything everybody calls an iris grows from a rhizome (some irises have bulbs, and some have thick root structures).

We'll focus on **bearded irises**, and their tough, potato-like **rhizomes** that live close to the surface, here.

It's recommended to get your divided irises back in the ground six weeks before the first frost. That can ensure the roots have time to establish before winter sets in. You can **divide and replant** in late summer or early fall, when the plant is dormant.



Scan this QR Code with your phone for a short video on dividing irises!



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Johnson, Ken. How to divide and plant bearded irises. August 20, 2021 <https://extension.illinois.edu/blogs/good-growing/2021-08-20-how-divide-and-plant-bearded-iris>

Spencer, S. Dividing Irises. <https://extension.psu.edu/dividing-irises>

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How to Divide

When it's time to divide, you'll want to start with a clean fork or spade and dig, from behind the plant if possible (to avoid hitting the rhizome), and remove the entire rhizome structure, including the roots. You may need to add some water to loosen the soil. From there, attempt to separate the rhizomes from one another if they're intertwined and separate the roots as you are able. No need to be terribly gentle to the fine roots, as they will be removed later.

Clean off the loose soil and remove any old, large center stalks that are no longer producing with either a tool or your hands (easier than a tool for some). As you pull these rhizomes apart, you should look for at least four issues:

1. **Iris Leaf Spot** - Can indicate an infection in affected leaves. Recommended to remove affected leaves.
2. **Iris Borer Holes** - NOT old root holes. Root holes are regularly-spaced on the bottom of the rhizome. Iris borer holes are larger. You may also see brown streaks in your leaves, which is an indication of iris borers, as they lay their eggs on the leaves for the larvae to travel down, leaving a brown trail, into the rhizome.
3. **Bacterial Soft Rot** - Any rhizome that feels soft when squeezed should be removed. Rhizomes should feel like a hard potato.
4. **Fungal Crown Rot** - If you see a gray cotton-like material at the crown/soil level, that may indicate fungal crown rot.

Any rhizome with iris borer holes, bacterial soft rot, or fungal crown rot should be removed. Soak the rhizomes in a 10% bleach solution for a few minutes. This helps remove any bacteria or fungus on the rhizomes.

Next, start dividing the irises by finding the natural break points, which are usually where the new off-shoots attach to the center rhizome, and keep any rhizome section that:

- Is firm and light-colored
- Is about 3 inches long and "thumb thickness" or more
- Has at least four fan leaves
- Had healthy roots

It's recommended to also clip the leaves back about $\frac{2}{3}$ of the way, or about 5 inches tall. This will help the rhizome focus its resources on growing new root structures instead of maintaining leaves. Remove any damaged leaves as well.

Clip the roots, leaving about 2-3 inches for future growth. Once these rhizomes have been broken up and cleaned, place them on a surface to dry completely, allowing the cuts and breaks to suberize before replanting or storing.



Scan me for a great article about dividing and planting irises!



Looking for more info? Scan this QR Code for information from the American Iris Society