

BLOOMING SEQUENCE

the most widely planted, the Tall Bearded iris (TB). Reaching up to 40in (100cm) or more, these are the most dramatic. Peaking in late May and early June, they have seven or more blooms per stem. Their flowers are larger than all other types, with a great variety in shape and colour. Early types, such as 'Deputé Nomblot', have falls that hang down almost vertically. Today, modern varieties, such as 'Paul Black', have been bred for flaring, almost horizontal falls.

Over the years, breeders have worked at developing thicker petals than those of the original wild species. This has led to bigger and longer-lasting garden flowers, better able to withstand sun and rain, as well as brighter colours.

Lace is another feature of modern iris, where the petals are finely crinkled around the edges, such as 'Lace Legacy'.

Developing new looks

The plants used to breed modern garden iris came from the Mediterranean area, and included blue-flowered *Iris pallida*.

From the wild species, bearded iris developed only slowly until the early decades of the 20th century. Then, in the 1920s, Britain was at the forefront of iris breeding. Larger and brighter flowers were produced, some of which are still grown today. Violet 'Deputé Nomblot' was introduced in 1929. Three years later, it was described in the American Cooley's garden catalogue as "the world's greatest iris". A year earlier, Cayeux's 'Pluie d'Or' was the epitome of the yellow iris, described in the raiser's catalogue as "the first large flowered iris deep yellow of actual value put into commerce".

Until the 1950s and '60s, the new varieties had rather droopy falls. Then, in the 1950s, ruffling of the petals appeared. 'Blue Rhythm' is typical of iris from this era, with simple, lightly ruffled flowers.

Today, hundreds of new iris are introduced every year. Most fade into obscurity, but a few stand the test of time, such as the curiously coloured chocolate and yellow TB 'Provencal' from 1978. >

The falls of 'Deputé Nomblot' hang almost vertically down, while those of 'Paul Black' are almost horizontal (from left).



Standard Dwarf Bearded iris 'Bedford Lilac'.

Planting a range of bearded iris brings a succession of colour to the garden, starting in April through to June.

Miniature Dwarf Bearded iris (MDB) and Standard Dwarf Bearded iris (SDB):

The miniatures are the earliest type to bloom, followed by the Standard Dwarf varieties. The first are less than 8in (20cm) high in flower, and have unbranched flower stems, with one or two flowers. The blooms are usually less than 3in (8cm) wide.

The SDB reach from 8-15in (21-40cm) high, with blooms less than 4in (10cm) across. They are usually more showy and longer-blooming than the earlier MDBs. This is because the stems are branched and have up to four buds in total, blooming in succession.

Intermediate Bearded iris (IB): These are next to bring colour to the borders and containers. Reaching from 15-27in (41-70cm) in height, they have a greater variety of flower types than the smaller varieties. The stems are branched, with four or five buds opening to flowers up to 5in (13cm) in diameter.

Border Bearded iris (BB): With six or more flowers per stem, these put on a later, bolder display. They are same height as the IBs, with flowers of the same diameter.

Tall Bearded iris (TB) and Miniature Tall Bearded iris (MTB):

The show ends with these varieties, which have seven or eight large flowers per tall stem. The MTBs grow only to 15-27in (41-70cm) high. Sometimes called table iris, these make the best cut flowers. One lovely example is 'Bumblebee Deelite', with red and yellow flowers.



Intermediate Bearded iris 'Langport Pagan'.



'Batik', a Border Bearded iris.



'Bumblebee Deelite', a Miniature Tall Bearded iris.