

# HOW TO DIG AND DIVIDE IRIS

(Rae Phillips/7.2.15)

Page 1 of 2 (or double-sided)

## **Glossary – or “Iris Speak”**

Rhizome – a potato-like portion of Iris plant that remains underground, from which leaves and bloom stalks come.

“Mother” rhizome – the original single rhizome that was originally planted. “Baby” is a new growth segment from that mother plant, usually still attached.

Clump – a group of attached rhizomes (usually radiating out from the mother plant with leaves facing inward towards her).

Toe – the portion of a rhizome where it is attached to the mother plant and no new growth comes from it.

Heel -- the “back” of the rhizome from which leaves and new structure grows.

## **WHEN**

The best time to divide and replant Iris is during their semi-dormant period which extends from a few weeks after blooming until new growth begins in the fall. In New Mexico, the summer is the ideal time. However Iris may be dug, divided, and replanted at any time of the year, except when freezing temperatures exist. Iris rhizomes planted in the late fall/early winter or very early spring will probably not bloom until the second year after planting.

A sign that Iris clumps need to be divided and thinned out is when the clumps become crowded, with small rhizomes and disappointing bloom. Typically this will be from 2 to 4 years after original planting. You want to discard rhizomes that have bloomed (the “mother” rhizome that was originally planted) and replant only healthy fans with strong foliage. A mother plant will not bloom again so there is no need to keep and plant it. Even the smallest rhizome broken off the clump will usually (eventually) grow to blooming size in a couple of years depending on the type of Iris. New increases (“babies”) will come from heel and sides of the rhizome.

## **DIG & DIVIDE**

Using a spading fork or shovel, dig around the clump and carefully pry it upward. Once the clump is loose, lift it up by grasping the leaves and shake off the loose dirt. You can drop the clump to help loosen as much dirt as possible without damaging the rhizomes. It is not uncommon for the clump to break into several parts when doing this.

If you want to keep track of name of iris, dig each variety separate and work on one at a time (or one group of same kind). If varieties are crowded into each other, it can be difficult to determine which clumps belong to which mother. Usually the new growth segments will “radiate” off the mother rhizome almost in a circle around her, with the leaf fans facing in towards the mother. Often in older clusters it will almost look like there is “nest” effect in the center.

Look at the clump and try to determine which is/are the old mother rhizome(s). They will typically have a dead bloom stalk on them, and no green foliage. With a 2-3 year growth, you will notice multiple rhizome segments coming from the mother rhizome like tacked on potatoes,

of which those may likewise have segments radiating from them. With really old clumps, they may even be stacked above each other. You can break apart the segments of rhizomes with your hands, or cut with a sharp knife. Confirm which ones are good – they should be firm with some leaf attachment and healthy pieces of root. Any soft rhizomes should be tossed; that might be a sign of rot starting (although not common in this area).

## **PROCESS**

Next, trim roots & leaves. If you are planting right back in the ground, there's no need to trim, but does make it easier to process. If planning to sell or give them to others (or for your own ascetics), leave about 2-3 inches of root and 5-7 inches of leaves attached. (For appearances, the most common leaf trimming is done at an angle; either low to high across the whole leaves, or angled low to high from each side. Leaving some root attached is simply to help hold the rhizome in place when replanted.)

To help keep same variety together, suggest you place in large paper bag (grocery type) and label name on bag. Even better, this is when I will go ahead and wipe most of the dirt off an inner leaf and write name directly on it. A dry rag works well to make it easier for ballpoint pen or magic marker to write on. Some people prefer to wait until cleaning & sanitizing rhizomes is done, but that might increase chances of them getting mixed up with other varieties.

Wash each rhizome, removing any loose dirt. A kitchen brush aids in this process, and I find large dishpan works well for this. You can usually do several before the water needs to be changed.

Then place them in a container mixed with a little bleach and lot of water (I use about ½ cup per half-filled 5-gallon bucket). It does not matter how long they are left in there; they are sanitized within a few minutes. For simplification, I leave them in until I have another batch cleaned and then swap them out.

They should then be laid out on the ground (or a table) to dry – just NOT in the sun or you will have equivalent of baked potato! In our climate this goes quickly.

If you have not yet labeled individual rhizomes, by all means do so now! Even after confirming labelled, I still keep each variety separated into papers bags, or on trays. (Never use plastic bags; it creates too much moisture and will cause rhizome to rot.)

## **NEXT ...PLANTING ...another subject**

Replanting the iris you plan to keep as quickly as possible will normally assure you of blossoms the following spring. Just remember: (1) Add lots of compost to beds and turn in. (2) Add fertilizer to overall flowerbed too. Use high phosphate (middle number in general fertilizer). Epsen Salts are good to add also. (3) The rhizome should be close to the surface – just about ½-inch of dirt covering it – and soil firmly packed around it. (4) The sooner planted, the more likely to have flowers come springtime!