Bearded Iris Facts

Bearded irises continue to enjoy their status as cherished heirloom plants in the home landscape. Long time cultivation and breeding attention have improved the color spectrum and flowering habit of this deer resistant and drought tolerant perennial. Their orchid-like blooms leave a lasting impression in the garden.

The American Iris Society has developed a classification system for bearded irises. **Tall Bearded Irises** have the largest flowers and their bloomstalks are 28" and up. The yearly winner of the prestigious Dykes Memorial Medal usually comes from this class.

Border and Intermediate Bearded Irises share the next height requirement of 16 to 27 inches. The bloom sequences for each class however are different. Intermediate Bearded Irises are at least a week ahead of their Border Bearded cousins. The latter tend to flower with the Tall Bearded. Foliage, bloomstalk and flower proportions are important distinctions in appreciating these median bearded irises.

Standard Dwarf Bearded Irises have bloomstalks averaging 8 to 15 inches. Their growth habit makes them an ideal perennial plant choice in rock garden settings. These popular medians come in a dazzling array of color and patterns. **Miniature Dwarf and Miniature Tall Bearded** round out the bearded classes recognized by the American Iris Society. Given the right growing conditions, there is truly a bearded iris form for any home landscaping application.

Bearded flowers feature two sets of distinctive petals. The **standards** are the uppermost arrangement. The lower arching ones are the **falls**. The **beards** protrude from the center of each flower and rest on top of each fall. Breeders have succeeded in creating **novelty irises** with horns, spoons or flounces at the end of each beard. Thanks to new found favor in iris gardening circles, AIS judges have awarded recent **Space Age** introductions the Dykes Memorial Medal.

Bearded irises have many attractive flower patterns. The most common one is the **self.** The entire bloom including the beard is one color. Pink bearded selfs have an added wrinkle. Their beards are typically a tangerine or orange shade. Breeders have been successful in transferring these beard pigments to white and blue selfs.

Bitones exhibit lighter shades of the same color on standards and falls. The **Bicolors** on the other hand feature two entirely different colors on the same flower. A popular combination of this pattern is yellow with purple or red. This color pattern is otherwise known as "Variegata." Its roots can be traced back to one of the ancestral species known as *Iris variegata.* Another bicolor combination is white standards with falls of purple, yellow, pink, red and blue. These patterns are known as **amoenas**. The white and pink coupling of this type has been the toughest one for modern breeders to achieve.

Another popular bearded iris flower pattern is **plicata.** It displays white, cream or light yellow ground colors on the petals with darker markings of red, blue or violet on the

edges. These markings can be dotted or stitched. **Luminata plicatas** are a recent advance in this pattern. The white ground color appears brushed with the darker overlay. It of appears along the veins and the edges of the falls.

Bearded varieties fall into three bloom categories. They can be classified as **early, midseason or late**. A good garden strategy is to sprinkle a bearded iris planting with members of each group. This approach results in a three to four week bloom sequence each spring depending on air temperatures. Most iris catalogs will discuss flower bud placements on new introductions. A high branch and bud count translates into a pleasing period of bloom. Bearded irises therefore can be an important ingredient in a progression of bloom strategy in any suburban garden. Try some.

For further information, we suggest consulting Dr. William Shear's "**The Gardener's Iris Book**." It is an outstanding guide to iris culture for any novice gardener. Dr. Shear has been a long time grower of a wide range of iris species. He is a professor of botany at Hampden-Sydney College and a resident of nearby Farmville, VA.