

# Divide Louisiana irises during September

Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service — Galveston County Office



PHOTO BY Dr. William M. Johnson

Louisiana irises can be divided and transplanted any time from August through early October.

The Louisiana iris continues to be a popular plant in local landscapes.

Though commonly called Louisiana irises, they are grown in much of the United States and even in Canada and other parts of the world.

Despite their name, gardeners tend to be surprised to learn that Louisiana irises originated in America and are well adapted to the soils and climate along the Gulf Coast. Louisiana irises commonly found in local landscapes are derived from five iris species, most of which are native to a limited area of south Louisiana and the Gulf Coast marsh areas between Texas and Florida.

These five species of iris are closely related and have been crossed with one another to

produce the amazing array of outstandingly beautiful hybrids that also are called Louisiana irises. Most of the Louisiana irises you find for sale will be hybrids of these five species, although the basic species also are beautiful and worthy of use in the garden.

Because all the primary colors are inherent in the various species that contributed to this group, there is no limit to the color range.

Louisiana irises can be divided and transplanted anytime from August through early October. Unlike most plants, Louisiana irises are at their most dormant stage in the late summer — making now the ideal time to divide them.

You might have noticed how many brown or yellow leaves

are on your plants now. Even if you decide you don't need to divide them this year, it's a good idea to get in and clean out the unattractive foliage before the new growth starts in earnest. This will make the planting more attractive.

Each year Louisiana irises grow and spread, creating more rhizomes and shoots. Eventually, the plants might become crowded, which can lead to lower vigor and poor flowering. This generally occurs two to three years after the bed is planted, depending on how close they were planted to begin with and how much room they have to spread.

Clumps might also grow beyond their allotted space, and dividing will help keep the clump the size you want and prevent the irises from taking over areas where they were not intended to grow.

The first step in dividing them is to use a shovel or garden fork to lift the Louisiana iris plants from the bed. Try to get as much of the root systems as possible, and do not damage the fans of new growth at the ends of the rhizomes. Put them aside in a shady area, and hose them down to keep them from drying out.

Once the bed is empty, take the opportunity to improve the soil in the bed before you replant the irises. Spread a 2-inch layer of compost or other organic matter over the soil, sprinkle a light application of



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a general-purpose fertilizer over the area and thoroughly work the soil.

To divide your irises, look over the clumps carefully. You will see that young rhizomes branch off from the older rhizomes. The younger rhizomes have a fan of green leaves at their tips with roots growing out from the rhizome at the base of the leaves. Break or cut off the young rhizomes at the point where they branch off from the old rhizome. Discard the old rhizome and replant the young rhizomes.

Plant the rhizomes horizontally with the fan of foliage facing the direction you want the plant to grow, and carefully cover all of the roots. Space the rhizomes about a foot apart. The top of the rhizome should be just below or barely show above the soil surface. Mulch the bed about 2 inches deep and water thoroughly. If you have any rhizomes left over, pot them to share with friends.

During extended periods of dry weather conditions this fall, winter or spring, water your irises once or twice a week to keep the plants well supplied with water. In addition, an application of fertilizer — such as ammonium sulfate, 21-0-0 — in February will keep the plants growing vigorously into the blooming season.

Louisiana irises growing in containers in aquatic gardens also may need to be divided and repotted, and this is a good time to do that as well. Remove the plants from the pot, and divide them by following the same procedures as the ones for irises growing in the ground. Use pond fertilizer tablets according to label directions to fertilize your containerized Louisiana irises in aquatic gardens.

One other note: There are a few other perennial plants grown in local landscapes that should be transplanted or divided this month. Like the Louisiana irises, they tend to be dormant now and will begin to grow actively sometime in

October as the weather cools down.

Agapanthus (Lily of the Nile), Easter lilies and calla lilies can also be divided and transplanted. If you'd like to divide or transplant spider lilies — *Lycoris radiata*, also called hurricane lilies or naked ladies — you may do so as soon as they finish blooming.

