

Bell County Master Gardeners  
Tip of the Week  
By Candace Mullen  
“Put a Flag in Your Yard!”

Have you noticed the “flags” waving in the old yards and in the cemeteries as you have gone by? Now that spring is here you will see more and more of them as the bloom in succession in the yards of the lucky people who have planted them.

I am talking of the beautiful and colorful Iris. The name is taken from the Greek goddess, Iris, which means rainbow. And the Iris appears in so many different colors and shades it is truly a rainbow when it is mass planted. The Iris adds architectural interest to the garden with its spiky green leaves that stay all season even after the flowers have faded. Their subtle perfume invades your senses; the flowers are delicately sturdy, and ideal for cutting and enjoying indoors. My mother used to call them “flags” and I didn’t know them as iris for years. Many people still refer to them as the “flags of spring!” The good news is there are varieties that have been developed that now re-bloom in the fall!

Iris are considered hardy herbaceous perennials or perennial herbs. There are over 200 -300 species and colors are plentiful. They have a sword-like foliage and usually 4 parts (3 petals or standards, 3 sepals or falls, stigma flaps, and a beard). There are bearded, beardless, and crested Iris. There are two major groups bulbous and rhizomatous. The rhizomes are to be planted on top of or half buried in the soil. You should improve the soil with peat moss, compost, or well-rotted manure to 4-6 inches in depth. Use a slow release fertilizer and divide the bulbs or rhizomes every 4-5 years in late summer.

Iris have many uses in medicine, perfumery, and also water purification. The juices of its fresh roots were often used for dropsy and coughs and as a cosmetic to remove freckles! It is now highly valued for its violet-like perfume. The Iris Cuprea, yellow Louisiana Iris, will improve water quality by consuming nutrient pollutants in ponds and bogs.

Vincent van Gogh painted multiple paintings of Irises in 1888-1890 to show their beauty, and the fleur-de-lis of France is a stylized iris adopted in the 12<sup>th</sup> century by Louis VII. The New Orleans Saints football team uses the image, and the purple Iris is one of the state flowers of Tennessee. You will see many old white Iris planted in cemeteries as they convey images of lost love and silent grief.

Look for the “flags” that are planted around the area and start planning where you will add them to your garden and what beautiful colors you will have. Try planting a flag—red, white and blue Iris! Have any questions about Central Texas gardening? Contact [ask.bcmga@gmail.com](mailto:ask.bcmga@gmail.com)