

GROWING IRIS ENSATA

I can think of no other iris that is so influenced by good culture than Iris ensata. If the proper culture is met, a typical plant will throw taller bloom stalks, more branches with extra buds, and larger flowers.

The most important need of Iris ensata is an understanding of the growth habit and why it diminishes so fast. If you start with a single strong fan newly transplanted three inches deep in the fall, that winter and following spring the plant is setting up a root system. It should not be expected to bloom, and if it did it certainly would not be typical. The second year with proper soil, water, and light that single fan should have increased to four to six fans, with good bloom, but, also one inch above the old rhizome. The third and prime year the rhizome mat will be another inch higher with sixteen to thirty six new fans. Going into the fourth year again the rhizome mat will have formed on top of the old, but now probably only one half of an inch because it is now at the soil surface. This fourth summer the plant is still strong and increases to sixty four to two hundred sixteen. Though the fans may still look good the root system is starting to suffer and collapse. Still the plant tries to grow into its fifth year setting new rhizomes on top of old. But above the soil line and with no new root contact the plant begins to die. With this growth habit I like to lift and divide every three years, replanting three inches deep. However, mind you that this scenario is of a typical well grown plant. Some plants due to genetics start to collapse on year three and need to be lifted and divided every two years.

To grow strong healthy ensata plants is more exacting that difficult for they truly are tough plants. Naturally found not only in Japan but Korea, China and Siberia growing in rich acid soil that is moist to wet.

The PH factor for Iris ensata is critical, living at 5.0 to 6.8 but thriving best around 5.8. Garden lime and new concrete is fatal. It has also been reported that Bone Meal is fatal, but I have not done a trial to confirm this.

The foundation of any garden is the soil and Iris ensata demands a good solid foundation. Rich heavy soil with ample organic matter is needed. I start with a good top soil that is approximately five to ten percent clay, adding twenty to thirty percent organic compost (well rotted cow manure) at every transplanting. I also recommend mulching with garden compost (two to three inches deep) as this helps suppress weeds, retains moisture, keeps the soil cool and slowly feeds the plant for three years.

Because it grows all summer long *Iris ensata* is very demanding of its water needs. I like to say wet in the spring and moist in the summer and fall. Take a clue from its natural growing site, not in, but next to fresh water, or in a meadow with a high water table. You may say, but wait, I have seen photos from Japan with irises growing in the water. If they truly are growing in the water then they are a close cousin, *Iris laevigata*, which is a great iris also. But if it is a photo of *Iris ensata*, the field was temporally flooded or potted plants were sunk only for the bloom time.

We have a manmade pond that has a sustained water level. Planting three test plants ten years ago, one in the water, one on the shore and one eight inches above the water table. The iris in the water died in two years by drowning. The plant eight inches above the water died in four years by climbing out of the soil and drying out. The iris next to the shore is not strong and robust, but is still surviving and blooming after ten years. It seems that the soil is so saturated that the old rhizomes rot away leaving the new in contact with the soil so that it can send out new roots each year. Out in the fields we irrigate each bed with four to six inches once a week from spring until the fall rains start on late October.

The light requirement is not as critical as the past three (PH, soil, water) cultural needs. Though the plants will grow and bloom its best in the full sun and or appreciates light afternoon shade.

For centuries Japanese hybridizers have been working with *Iris ensata* known there as Hanashobu. Using only *ensata* many different flower forms and color patterns have been achieved. Since they were introduced to the rest of the world other hybridizers have been working with them. Only recently tetraploid plants and interspecies hybrids using *Iris pseudacorus* and *Iris virginica* have come available. Presently most plants are thirty two to forty two inches tall with a grass like foliage appearance similar to a siberian iris. Though the plant is handsome (receiving 50% of the points in garden judging) it is the flower that is so captivating.

A field in bloom from a distance will have all shades of violet with a few clear whites to add some sparkle. As you move closer the violet shades start to electrify or turns to soft pastels from red-violets to pinks, dark purples to stormy sea blue-violets. When viewed up close it is the patterns that excite the eye. From the soft random stroke of a paint brush of color called a brushed pattern to wide bands and sharp rims. Also to be discovered are broken patterns where no two flowers look alike. Some flowers have freckles while others have been sanded by a garden pixie with fairy dust. Sunray patterns glow where the veins are lighter than the body.

And veined patterns look like a spider webbing laid on the flower. Add to this mix your choice of a flower with three falls (petals), six falls, nine falls or more and you have the makings for a flower for any taste.

I hope that an interest has been sparked for they truly are only demanding and not difficult to grow. If you wish to see new varieties along with older, the next National Japanese Iris Convention will be hosted by The Greater Portland Iris Society in Portland, Oregon during June of 2011.