

Irises: Rainbow of Color

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Tall bearded irises create summer drama

The tall bearded irises grace the precious days of early summer with gorgeous flowers atop tall, robust stems. The lush flower colors against a blue sky means summer is finally here in the Northwest.

To celebrate the bloom season of these beautiful plants, local iris grower and hybridizer, John Ogdon of Rainbow's End Iris Farm in Bow, will present the program, "Iris, Beautiful Iris," as a Know & Grow lecture sponsored by the Skagit Master Gardeners on June 12, 1 to 3 p.m., in the WSU Mount Vernon Northwestern Research and Extension Center auditorium adjacent to the discovery Gardens on Memorial Highway. A tour of John's garden will follow the lecture. The lecture and tour are free and open to the public.

It's easy to love the tall bearded irises both because they epitomize our long awaited summer and also because they exhibit such floral beauty. From a distance their colors astound the eye, and close-up they reveal the exquisite intricacy of flower parts: six petals divided into three "standards" and three "falls" with "beards" on the falls. Added to this is the variety of colors that sometimes occurs on the same flower.

John himself, however, best explains the elegance of the tall bearded iris. "My wife Sarah and I love iris. Over the years we have had over 600 varieties of tall bearded iris and we currently have about 500 varieties. The wide palette irises provide each year is unequalled in spring flowers. Multiple blooms per stem and surprising fragrance ranging from sweet to spice to citrus make iris season worth the wait!"

All of the obvious reasons aside, the true beauty of iris is how hardy they are. They require virtually nothing more than weeding and occasional dividing.

Iris is an easy plant to hybridize and the rewards are amazing. John will talk more on this topic during the class.

The Ogdon's invite the public to their farm to walk through truly a rainbow of colors that can at times saturate your mind! They are easy to find, just off Bayview-Edison Road between Samish Island and Edison. They welcome you to stop, take a stroll and some pictures. The dogs are very friendly.

In his lecture John will discuss the culture of these plants. Brief summaries of the points he will cover are listed below. Let it be said first, however, that our Skagit climate is well suited to these plants, with our wet winters and dry summers. They rarely require water in the summer and they thrive alongside drought resistant plants.

- When to plant: July, August or September
- Where to plant: Full sun with good drainage.
- Soil preparation: Well drained soil with an ideal pH of 6.8.
- Depth to plant: Tops of rhizomes exposed with roots spread out and facing downward.
- Distance apart: 12 to 24 inches.
- Watering: Newly set plants need moisture but once established don't need to be watered.
- Fertilization: Bone meal, superphosphate and 6-10-10 fertilizers are all effective. Light applications in early spring and a month after bloom.
- Thinning old clumps: Thin or divide about every 3 to 4 years.
- General Garden Care: Keep beds clear and free of weeds and allow rhizomes to bake in the sun. Cut off bloom stems close to the ground after blooming. Remove brown leaves.



Tall bearded irises herald the beginning of summer with their intense rainbow of colors. Photo courtesy of John Ogdon / Skagit County Master Gardeners

The origins of the bearded iris are species native to Asia Minor, Kashmir, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Middle East, Italy, Slovenia, Croatia, and Bosnia. Over the years, hybridizers began crossing the species and selecting cultivars, resulting in what we now know as the “Tall Bearded Iris” group.

John Ogdon himself is a hybridizer of tall bearded irises and will discuss the methods he uses and show photos of some of his creations.

His lecture should answer any questions you have about these plants and inspire you to grow them yourselves.



Some iris variety photos and names - Left: Afterglow, Center: Eagles Flight, Right: Lemon Curd
Photos courtesy of John Ogdon / Skagit County Master Gardeners

RESOURCE:

- *Iris, A Gardener's Encyclopedia*, Claire Austin, Timber Press, 2005.