

DIVIDING IRIS

Bearded irises are well adapted to Kansas and multiply quickly. After several years, the centers of the clumps tend to lose vigor, and flowering occurs toward the outside. Dividing iris every three to five years will help rejuvenate them and increase flowering. Iris may be divided from late July through August, but late July through early August is ideal. Because iris clumps are fairly shallow, it is easy to dig up the entire clump. The root system of the plant consists of thick rhizomes and smaller feeder roots. Use a sharp knife to cut the rhizomes apart so each division consists of a fan of leaves and a section of rhizome. The best divisions are made from a double fan that consists of two small rhizomes attached to a larger one, which forms a Y-shaped division. Each of these small rhizomes has a fan of leaves. The rhizomes that do not split produce single fans. The double fans are preferred because they produce more flowers the first year after planting. Single fans take a year to build up strength. Rhizomes that show signs of damage due to iris borers or soft rot may be discarded, but you may want to physically remove borers from rhizomes and replant if the damage is not severe. It is possible to treat mild cases of soft rot by scraping out the affected tissue, allowing it to dry in the sun and dipping it in a 10 percent solution of household bleach. Make the bleach solution by mixing one-part bleach with nine parts water. Rinse the treated rhizomes with water and allow them to dry before replanting. Cut the leaves back by two-thirds before replanting. Prepare the soil by removing weeds and fertilizing. Fertilize according to soil test recommendations or by applying a complete fertilizer, such as a 10-10-10, at the rate of 1 pound per 100 square feet. Mix the fertilizer into the soil to a depth of 6 inches. Be wary of using a complete fertilizer in areas that have been fertilized heavily in the past. A growing number of soil tests show phosphorus levels that are quite high. In such cases, use a fertilizer that has a much higher first number (nitrogen) than second (phosphorus).

When to Pick Peaches

Peaches are best when ripened on the tree but fruit growers may wish to pick a bit early to prevent damage from birds, have a higher pectin content for jams and jellies or to have firmer fruit for canning. Peaches that are mature enough to pick are still hard. They do not give when lightly squeezed. However, these peaches will ripen off the tree and will have very good quality. They may not be quite as sweet as a tree-ripened peach but are still very good. So what do we look for to tell if a peach is mature enough to harvest? Let's look at a couple of factors.

Color: The reddish coloration is not a good indicator. Look instead for what is called the "ground color." This is the part of the peach that does not turn red; for example around the stem. The ground color of the peach will lose its greenish tinge and turn yellow when the peach is mature enough to harvest. I use this characteristic more to determine when NOT to pick a peach. If there is any green in the ground color, it is too early. If the ground color is yellow, then I move to the next characteristic.

Ease of Removal: A mature peach will separate easily from the branch if the peach is lifted and twisted. If it doesn't, it is not mature enough to pick yet. All peaches will not be ready to pick at the same time. Pick only those that are ready and come back later for more. It often takes 3 to 5 pickings to harvest a peach tree.

Peaches that are picked early but will be used for fresh eating should be allowed to ripen inside at room temperature. Once they are ripe, they can be refrigerated to preserve them for enjoyment over a longer period of time.

Spider Mites on Tomatoes

We have seen some impressive spider mite damage on tomatoes. This is a little surprising considering how little hot and dry weather we have had this summer. Look for stippling on the upper surface of the leaves as well as some fine webbing on the underside of the leaves. These tiny arthropods (they are not true insects) are often difficult to see due to their size and their habit of feeding on the underside of leaves. If mites are suspected, hold a sheet of white paper beneath a leaf and tap the leaf. Mites will be dislodged and can be seen as tiny specks on the paper that move about. Spider mite control can be challenging. A strong jet of water can be used to remove the mites but may not be as easy as it sounds. A high-pressure directed spray is

needed to dislodge the mites. Since spider mites feed on the underside of the leaves, the spray is most effective if it comes from below. This can be difficult to accomplish with a thumb over the end of the hose. Some gardeners use a water wand hooked to a shut-off valve. The water breaker is then replaced by a brass nozzle. Horticultural oils and insecticidal soaps (Safer's, for example) can also be helpful. Spray early in the morning when temperatures are cooler and plants have rehydrated. Resprays will likely be needed.

Green June Beetles

Green June beetle (*Cotinis nitida*) adults are actively flying around and “bumping” into people and objects. Adults are 3/4 to 1.0 inches in length, and velvety-green, tinged with yellow-brown coloration. Green stripes with yellow-orange margins extend lengthwise on the front wings. The underside of the body is distinctly shiny and metallic green or gold. Adults fly like “dive bombers” over turfgrass for several weeks in mid-summer. The green June beetle has a one-year life cycle, and overwinters as a mature larva (grub). Adults emerge in late-June and are active during the day, resting at night on plants or in thatch. The adults produce a sound that resembles that of bumble bees. Adults will feed on ripening fruits and may occasionally feed on plant leaves. The male beetles swarm in the morning, “dive bombing” to-and-fro above the turfgrass searching for females that are located in the turfgrass (they are desperately seeking a mate). Females emit a pheromone that attracts males. Eventually, clusters of beetles will be present on the surface of the soil or turfgrass with several males attempting to mate with a single female (I think this qualifies as an “insect orgy”). Mated females that have survived the experience lay a cluster of 10 to 30 eggs into moist soil that contains an abundance of organic matter. Eggs hatch in about 2 weeks in early August and the young larvae feed near the soil surface. The larvae feed primarily on organic matter including thatch and grass-clippings; preferring soils that are excessively moist. Larvae are 3/8 (early instars) to 1.5 (later instars) inches in length, and exhibit a strange behavioral trait—they crawl on their back.