

MESSENGER-INQUIRER



University of Kentucky
College of Agriculture,
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Cooperative Extension Service



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HORTICULTURE EDUCATION
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April 27, 2024

Iris and Peony Bring Back Memories in the Spring
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As I see the tall bearded irises beginning to bloom and the peonies with flower buds, I remember my grandmother's garden with these plants lining the fence in front of the vegetable garden. My mother divided some of them so she enjoys them in her garden today. It is nice to see these plants blooming in time for Mother's Day. Iris and peony grow well in gardens and serve as a nice background for other plants.

The bearded iris flower (*Iris x germanica*) has six petals. Three of the petals are upright and are called standards. The three petals which hang down are called falls. The size and shape of the petal depends on the species or cultivar of iris.

The bearded iris receives its name from the tufts of hair that appear down the center of the flower petals that hang down. There are numerous species, hybrids, and cultivars. Tall bearded irises are the most popular and bloom in May. The height reaches 28 inches or more. The flowers are 4 to 7 inches across.

The flower colors of bearded iris include virtually all the colors in the rainbow from nearly black to pristine white. Some flowers are bicolored with the falls one color and standards

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another. The iris is appropriately named the "rainbow flower" because of the wide variety of colors available. In addition, more than one flower is usually produced on each flower stem.

Bearded irises prefer to grow under full sun conditions. If the plants are grown in too much shade, there will be little or no bloom. Well-drained soil is important for irises to prevent rotting.

The division of bearded iris is completed by dividing the clumps of rhizomes in August. Rhizomes are underground, thick horizontal stems. The entire clump is usually lifted and separated by breaking or cutting the individual rhizomes apart. In selecting plants from an old clump, choose the strongest and keep as many feeding roots as possible. The leaves, which are called the fan, should be cut back to half or one-third their length. The roots on the rhizome are planted at or near ground level. Thoroughly water the rhizomes after planting. As you see the blooms of the bearded iris, mark the plants you would like to share with others or take note of the ones you would like to include in your garden in August.

Peony (*Paeonia officinalis*, *Paeonia lactiflora*, and hybrids) returns year after year and is called an herbaceous perennial, because at the end of the growing season it dies back to the ground. Peonies grow best in full sun and well-drained soil. There are tree peonies (*Paeonia suffruticosa*) which have a woody stem, but those are not as common and require different growing conditions. The tree peony will not be discussed here. According to Dr. Rick Durham, Extension Specialist for Consumer Horticulture, peonies have a long life span and are commonly grown in the Kentucky garden.

When planting the root, make sure it is not too deep. The eyes or bud should be just below the surface of the soil. If it is planted too deeply, the plants will not bloom.

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Flower colors of peonies include white and tones of pink and red. Some may have a tint of yellow in the flower petals. The blossoms are beautiful in cut flower arrangements. You will know they are in the house because of their fragrance.

There are peony cultivars with single flowers. These blossoms have a single petal layer that surrounds bright yellow flower parts called stamens in the center. Plants with the single flowers do not need to be staked. The double flowers are the size of a softball because the stamens have turned into petals. These plants may need staking since the large blossoms tend to bend over on the ground after a spring rain.

After the peony is finished flowering, the remaining plant is shrub-like and can serve as a background for other perennials and annuals. The height and spread of the plant vary with the cultivar. They can spread of 2.5 to 3 feet and reach a height of 2.5 to 3 feet. Leave the foliage as long as possible through the growing season to strengthen the plant and encourage flowering for next year. If the foliage does become unsightly, wait until late August or September before cutting the leaves off 1 to 2 inches above the soil and discard the leaves.

Propagating a peony is best in late summer. When dividing the plant, make sure you have 3 to 5 eyes or buds per division. Remember to plant it with the eyes just below the soil. It will take 2 to 3 years before the division will bloom. Peonies can wait for many years before they need dividing. You will know it is time to divide it when the flower size is smaller and the plants are crowded.

For more information about iris and peony plants, contact the Daviess County Cooperative Extension Service at 270-685-8480 or annette.heisdorffer@uky.edu.

Annette's Tip:

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Include re-blooming irises in the garden to enjoy them in late summer and fall. A few cultivars that re-bloom are 'Immortality' with white flowers, 'Polar King' with white flowers, 'Pink Attraction' with pink flowers, 'Best Bet' with blue flowers, and 'Invitation' with white standards and apricot falls.

To my knowledge, peonies only bloom once. This is unfortunate for peony lovers but this keeps them special.

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