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Dig deep: explore the world of irises

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It's not difficult to understand Tina Muller's fascination with irises, once you see her gardens.

Thousands of blooming iris flowers display a rainbow of colors shimmering in the mid-morning sun. Delicate, crinkled petals gently drift back and forth in the spring breeze.

Muller operates Tina and Daughters Iris Garden, located in south Billings, with the help of her four daughters.

The family cares for as many as 25,000 plants in the spring and summer, then digs bulbs in the fall and ships them to customers around the country.

The captivating plant

Often referred to as the "poor man's orchid" because of their appearance and easy-to-grow characteristics, these perennial flowers are some of the first flowers of spring to bloom, though they can last into July.

Hybridized "reblooming" irises have been spotted blooming into autumn.

Spring weather conditions in Billings were ideal for irises. The rain kept plants across the city watered and the cool weather helped blooms last longer, in some cases delaying blooming for the mid- to late-blooming irises.

Irises produce showy, six-lobbed flowers in most every color, often marbled, striped or painted. The plant grows from a rhizome bulb that can produce a dozen flowering stems.

The flower is made up of "falls" that droop down and the erect "standards" that rise over the top of the flower. Fuzzy "beards" are located on the falls like creeping caterpillars, and can be a variety of colors as well.

Muller considers irises one of the easiest flowers to grow. She raises three sizes of iris: dwarfs, which reach heights between 8 and 14 inches; intermediates at 15-26 inches in height; and tall bearded, growing up to 45 inches tall.

Lucky 13th year

More than a decade ago, Muller was presented with an opportunity to commercially grow irises.

She was uncertain at first if taking on an iris farm was the right move, especially with three young children and an infant.

The budding irisarian took a chance, and 13 years later has 1,500 varieties of iris planted across nearly an acre in the family's backyard.

Muller's daughters grew up in the iris gardens, earning money during the summers by helping their mom. Now her daughters are 21, 19, 17 and 14.

"To me irises are like kids. Sometimes they're temperamental and don't bloom. You move them to a different location and they bloom like crazy," Muller said.

Iris care

Working with irises for 13 years has given Muller a long list of do's and don'ts.

The soil around an iris plant needs to be rid of any weeds or grasses that could compete with the plant.

Muller uses a pre-emergent that helps with weed seeds. A systemic, broad-spectrum herbicide can be sprayed around the iris, but Muller warns not to get any directly on the plant.

"A bit of overspray won't kill the iris, but distresses the flowers," she said.

Muller has discovered that irises don't like nitrogen fertilizer. Though it helps with blooms, it rots the rhizomes.

If using a fertilizer, Muller said to use nothing above a 10:10:10 mixture or half the normal amount of fertilizers such as Miracle Grow.

She recommends using bone meal in the soil, and has found irises prefer acidic soil as opposed to alkaline, but will grow in anything, she said.

Established irises require only four or five "soaks" during the summer and at least a half day of hot sun. They will grow in shade but often won't bloom, Muller said.

"It's a drought flower, which is probably why they do so well on the rims. It's a perfect plant for Montana," she said.

Iris misconceptions

A common misconception, Muller said, is that the rhizome should be above ground. However, this hinders growth of the iris by stressing the plant.

"Here in Montana it is too cold for that," she said. "The rhizomes need to be placed barely under the soil, with about a quarter-inch of soil on top to protect them."

She also noted a lot of people think it is proper to plant iris rhizomes in the fall, but Muller said it is important to plant towards the end of July, into the first part of August.

"The iris needs a month to get its root system growing, and get established before the first hard freeze in mid-September," she said.

Another misconception Muller notices is that people assume irises change color.

"Irises clone themselves, and it is physically impossible for them to change color," Muller said. "The reason people think they change is that purples are dominant and aggressive, and multiply faster. These irises can choke out other colors."

To avoid purple irises taking over, Muller recommends digging up and spacing irises out every three to four years and to plant different colors at least a foot apart.

Preparing plants after blooming

When the flowers have dried, Muller recommends leaving the plant alone, as the leaves feed the roots.

Mid-July is the ideal time to dig and move irises, and cut the leaves back. Often the iris will put new leaves out before winter.

Readying the plant for winter depends on the type of gardener you are, Muller said.

"If you're a fall gardener or a spring gardener, it doesn't matter, as long as the plant is cleaned up and the dead parts are removed by April 1," she said.

Irises at the Muller gardens are prepared for customers in late July.

Once the plants stop flowering they are allowed to rest before the family digs in. The plants are cut, cleaned, marked, orders are filled and customers are called. After the orders are complete, the family digs out the remaining irises, spreads them out and plants new plants.

Muller ships plants all over the U.S., except to California and Hawaii, due to strict restrictions.

The plant can be out of the ground about a month. Muller warns not to store the plant in the fridge. If not planning to plant upon receiving it, she said to store it in a cool, dark place.

Visiting the gardens

"I just love this business. In life you should do what you love, and I really love what I do," Muller said.

She shares that love of iris gardening with as many people as she can, hosting convention groups and assisted living communities and offering her extensive knowledge on irises to curious customers.

"I share with as many people as possible. Not everyone has a place to put irises, but you can always come and look," she said.

People are encouraged to visit the gardens while the flowers are blooming. At that time, they are able to view and order specific plants. The gardens are located a few blocks off South 27th Street, at the end of Kimble Drive off Garden Avenue.

Muller keeps daily hours from 9:30 a.m. to 6 p.m. through blooming season. After June 28 the family asks if people want to come by to call 248-2249. Irises can be picked out after blooming season with the aid of photographs.

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