

Gardener Meets Louisiana Iris Worker

They are not often celebrated in poetry or prose, but close encounters between beauty-seeking, information-hungry gardeners and skilled, wizened Louisiana Iris Workers arise every year, often in the spring. Encounters recur at shows and in meetings, at sales and around booths, sometimes even at family and social events when the Iris Workers are supposed to be off duty.

The facts fly in these skirmishes. Gems of wisdom flow freely. The pay is poor, and credit rarely accrues to dedicated Louisiana Iris Workers. Over a career, innumerable gardeners are gently directed away from muck and folly and along the good garden path. (Actually, muck is not necessarily a bad thing, but that's jumping ahead). What follows is a fictional account of such a dust-up, although inspired by fact. It is entirely civil, as you will note. Any resemblance to any individual, living or dead, is possibly coincidental.

GARDENER: Hi. I have two kinds of Louisiana irises, the blue and the yellow. Can you tell me why my yellow Louisiana irises don't bloom?

LOUISIANA IRIS WORKER: (Sighing) I'm not sure your yellow irises are actually Louisiana irises. Let me guess: they are tall, grow rampantly, and may even crowd out neighboring plants, but the yellow flowers are a bit small and occur infrequently.

GARDENER: Yes, exactly. Well, they do bloom a little, and I have noticed that my blue irises are turning yellow.

IRIS WORKER: If you check, I think you'll find that the leaf of your yellow irises has a distinct midrib, whereas your blue Louisiana irises have leaves that are entirely flat. As do all true Louisiana irises.

GARDENER: I don't know, but I'll check. How can I get them to bloom?

IRIS WORKER: What you have is yellow flag iris or *I. pseudacorus*. They are not native irises. They come

from Europe. You need to dig them up and send them back. They are beautiful in the wetlands of their native Lithuania. I recommend Lithuania. They will bloom beautifully in Lithuania.

GARDENER: What?

IRIS WORKER: I know. Impossible. But justice and the environment would be well-served. Those irises were imported to the U. S. many years ago. Designers and landscapers often incorporate them into garden plans because they have pretty foliage and grow like weeds. And, because they are so aggressive, they are plentiful and cheap. There is also a big dollop of ignorance involved. Too many of these hard-working design folks think they are Louisiana irises. But what they actually are is trouble.

GARDENER: What kind of trouble?

IRIS WORKER: Well, as a gardener, they will provide you with a nice clump of foliage, but the rhizomes will be so dense that the clump will crowd out other plants as it spreads. Your blue Louisiana irises are not turning yellow. They are being crowded out by the yellow invaders. And yellow flags won't bloom well if you have them in garden soil. I have never seen good bloom on *I. pseudacorus* unless they were growing in water, such as at the edge of a pond. Which brings up a second way they are trouble. In water, the seeds will float and can get out into streams and bayous, and find their way into the wetland habitat of our real, native Louisiana irises. They will crowd out our wild irises and other vegetation, which is a problem, and not just in Louisiana. In some states, it is illegal to sell *I. pseudacorus* at all. They clog the waterways and cause real economic harm. It's better to stick with our native irises.

GARDENER: Well, I would like to try more Louisiana irises. I didn't realize they came in so many colors. I have a strip of grass between my driveway and a paved walk. I was thinking of filling it in with Louisiana irises. Do you think this would work?

IRIS WORKER: It might. There are a few things to consider. The first might be how wide the space is. As irises grow, they produce new growth off the sides of each rhizome, and then those new plants themselves grow offsets, and so on every year. The result is a clump that will expand over a few seasons. If your space is only, say, two feet wide, the rhizomes will soon be crawling up onto the pavement. How long this will take depends on the particular iris cultivar. Every time a new leaf grows out in the middle of a fan, the rhizome gets longer, so as is sometimes said, they tend to walk. In some varieties, a single rhizome might grow to five or six inches in a year, or they may reach eight or ten inches. So, you need to think about the space required for a clump to develop.

GARDENER: Okay. That might not work.

IRIS WORKER: Another consideration is water. Louisiana irises require lots of moisture to grow and bloom well. A narrow space near where you walk might not be the kind of spot you would want to irrigate sufficiently for the irises. Plus, a long row of nothing but irises might be spectacular in bloom, but in some seasons – such as the heat of the summer – they might not be so attractive in a mass, particularly without ample, consistent irrigation. It is often better to think of placement interspersed with other plants in a landscape setting.

GARDENER: Well, I do have some spots in flower beds that might work. Do they like shade? I have a few large trees.

IRIS WORKER: Some shade is fine, maybe even beneficial. They do need about a half day of sun to bloom well, and some of it can be filtered. Some of the native species – from which all the hybrids are derived – will grow in full sun, but often they are found in partial shade from deciduous trees. It would not be a good idea to plant them where the shade of evergreens denies them winter sunshine. Remember, the growing season of irises begins in the fall, runs through winter, and bloom occurs in early to mid-spring. They expect to get good light in the winter. In the hot summer, a little shade will make them happy.

If you have friends in the cold north, don't tell them this. The growing season is shorter there, and the Louisiana irises need full sun to promote the growth needed for good bloom. Louisianas do very well in cold climates, but folks there have to make some adjustments in how they grow them.

The biggest problem with planting near trees is competition from tree roots. Louisiana irises are water lovers. Trees are like giant straws, and their thousands of little leaves, bless their hearts, are constantly sucking up moisture. They leave the subsoil drier than you might imagine, and under trees, the irises will want more water than is available. You may think they are getting plenty of water, but they are not getting the share they need. If they are planted too near tree roots, they will not do very well. Along the Gulf Coast, they can benefit from a little shade but are best not planted directly under the canopy or where the roots extend. Some trees have dense surface roots – like Southern Magnolias and maples – and it is a bad idea to plant under this type of tree. If you dig down to plant your irises and there are tree roots already there, beware.

GARDENER: What about cypress trees? I see pictures of irises growing happily in swamp scenes right along with cypress all covered with hanging moss. Beautiful!

IRIS WORKER: Yes, and that's an interesting question. What you see in a wetland scene is Louisiana irises and cypress and other trees growing happily together in standing water. In that situation, there is plenty of water for everyone. Bring that cypress into your garden, however, and its roots will rob the irises of water every time. Cypress roots extend out much farther from the trunk than you might think and grow close to the surface. Think about those knees they produce. But the picture of the irises growing naturally in a wetland is the right image to have in mind when it comes to growing Louisiana irises well. Today's hybrids are derived from just four or five species, each of which likes constant moisture. Two of these species, in fact, are found only in wooded swamps or freshwater marsh. What this means is that, in your garden, you can't give them too much water. But it is easy to give them too little.

GARDENER: That sounds like it could be a problem.

I don't have a pond. And I have other plants that don't come from the swamp and don't want poor drainage.

IRIS WORKER: Actually, the irises are tolerant of a range of conditions, and with a little planning they can be worked into almost any landscape. You could plant them in a regular bed with perennials and annuals, perhaps small shrubs, and just make sure that they do not dry out. Consistent moisture is the key. They don't have to be in a bog, but you should plan to give them some extra water. Flooding with a soaker hose is good. If there is a period of drought, make sure that the irises are well watered.

GARDENER: What will happen if they don't get enough water?

IRIS WORKER: Well, there will be less growth. The foliage may be shorter. You'll have fewer and shorter bloom stalks. In summer, the foliage may look scruffy, and it is possible for the plants to go dormant. But dormancy is a natural protection against drought. You can expect that growth will resume, especially beginning in the fall. The plants will not die, but you can avoid this disruption with regular watering. You can minimize the potential for declining growth or dormancy by picking the right location. Perhaps a low spot where water pools. Away from tree roots. And you can conserve moisture by maintaining a good mulch of a few inches of organic material like leaves or bark. You can make watering more convenient by installing a simple, inexpensive timer between a faucet and a hose. Both mechanical and battery-operated ones work well. Not necessary, but an idea that works well in some situations.

GARDENER: I understand about mulching, but I'll have to think about adding high tech stuff to the mix.

IRIS WORKER: Understood. Another option is to grow the irises in artificial bogs, and it is really simple. Just buy some mortar mixing tubs at a big box or hardware store, sink them into the ground, and plant your irises there. With no drain holes, the tubs will become little swamps that mimic the natural habitat of the irises. Other plants won't be affected, and tree roots can't get into the tubs. You still have to water enough to be sure the tubs don't dry out, but the irises will love

growing in muck, and the foliage will look much better through the hot months if the irises can stay really wet. There are all sorts of variations that will work. If you do use this approach, just make sure the containers are at least six inches deep, and preferably a little deeper.

GARDENER: What do I do if the leaves begin to look bad?

IRIS WORKER: You can trim off yellowing foliage. It is a good practice to do this. Even in a well-grown clump of irises, yellow leaves often appear. You can usually just pull them out by hand. The clump will look better, and the yellow leaves aren't doing any good for the plants.

GARDENER: It sounds like there is a little more work involved than I realized.

IRIS WORKER: Louisiana irises are worth a little trouble, but they are not really too time-consuming once you get them planted. But we have not even talked about fertilizing yet. Consistent moisture and sufficient fertilizer are the two keys to good Louisiana iris bloom.

GARDENER: Should I be taking notes?

IRIS WORKER: Not really. I'm going to give you some printed information on culture, and all this stuff is online. Just search for "Louisiana iris culture." But while you are here, let me tell you the main thing about fertilizing Louisiana irises.

GARDENER: Okay.

IRIS WORKER: Those people who fail to fertilize their irises don't tend to get good bloom, especially after the first year they are planted. On the other hand, those who fertilize regularly – twice a year is usually recommended, once in September or October and again in early February along the Gulf Coast – will enjoy beautiful flowers in March and April. Farther north, these dates have to be adjusted, of course. Most people we talk to who report they are disappointed in their Louisiana iris bloom admit that they did not fertilize. Water AND fertilizer are the keys.

GARDENER: What fertilizer should I use?

IRIS WORKER: This is where you will get different recommendations. The traditional suggestion in Louisiana iris publications was to use a balanced chemical fertilizer, such as 8-8-8. And that works. Some people feel that the first number – which is nitrogen, should be higher in the fall feeding and lower in spring. Some also feel that the middle number – the phosphorous – does not need to be nearly so high because phosphorous does not leach out of the soil, and too much of it has bad environmental effects. The evidence based on the performance of the irises is anecdotal. What is clear, however, is that those who fertilize with SOMETHING get a good bloom, and those who do not fertilize are disappointed.

GARDENER: What about organic fertilizers? Are all these chemicals a good thing?

IRIS WORKER: Well, you got me there. Probably not. Organic fertilizers work well and are a good idea. They are a bit more complicated in that you have to determine the mix that will supply the nutrients needed and you have to consider the rate at which they break down. Chemicals nutrients generally are available immediately, unless you use time-release products that are designed to break down slowly. You would need to do some research to come up with the best mix of organic fertilizers, and there are alternatives. Cottonseed Meal and Alfalfa Meal are often recommended. Garden centers often sell pre-mixed combinations of organic fertilizers that cover the N-P-K needs of most plants. Rose growers tend to be “into” organic fertilizers, and you might learn a lot by reading about how they fertilize. Going organic is a good idea, but does require more forethought than chemicals.

GARDENER: Well, that’s something to think about.

IRIS WORKER: This does bring up one other matter that I should have mentioned earlier. When you plant your irises, you need to add copious amounts of organic material to the soil. Well rotted compost, finely ground bark, peat moss, well-rotted manure, that sort of thing. Irises are heavy feeders, and in the wild, the soil is naturally filled with organic matter. A wetland, where these irises originated, is a virtual soup of nutrients,

and the organic content is off the charts with decaying leaves and so forth. It will be a huge plus if you start with soil high in organic content. Pile 4-6 inches of organic material on the bed and turn it in. Not too difficult, and well worth the effort.

GARDENER: Okay. I would expect to prepare the soil for any new plants.

IRIS WORKER: No one goes out to fertilize the irises in the wild, and yet they bloom beautifully. But they originated in an environment where ample nutrients were naturally present. This is why, in a garden, we have to supply fertilizer and extra organic material – to mimic the nutrient-rich setting where the irises developed.

GARDENER: Well, I appreciate all the information. You have given me some ideas, but also some work to do.

IRIS WORKER: It will pay off. You will be happy in the spring. And get in touch with us with questions any time. Our iris club is full of people with experience and opinions. You might even get some free irises. I see there are others who have questions.

NEXT GARDENER: Hi. Can you tell me why my yellow Louisiana irises don’t bloom?

IRIS WORKER: How much time do you have?

