



Gardeners Information Service

DIVIDING REBLOOMING IRISES

I have irises that bloom in the spring and again in the fall. When do I divide them?

—S.L., BEAUFORT, SOUTH CAROLINA

Most remontant irises—those that bloom more than once a year—are bearded types, so we'll assume that's what you have. These fall into the rhizomatous category (as opposed to bulbous) and should be divided every two or three years. The exception is the aril iris, which may need to be divided annually.

Mary Forte of Fortes Iris Gardens in Los Banos and Atascadero, California, recommends dividing remontants about six weeks after the last bloom fades in the spring. "At that time, the irises are resting from the spring bloom but haven't yet started to actively develop new rhizomes," she explains. "Sometimes they pout after division and will skip a bloom season or two, but once in a while they will go ahead and bloom the same fall."

To divide, carefully dig up the rhizomes and cut the newer portions away from the old, discarding the latter. Then replant the new rhizomes. "The faster you get them back in the ground and watered, the more likely they are to rebloom that same year," says Forte.

Terry Aitken, editor at the American Iris Society, recommends using any late-fall bloom shoots of newly transplanted remontant irises as cut flowers, "so that the plant can focus on vegetative growth for the following spring."

PROPAGATING HISBISCUSES

I have several hibiscuses as houseplants. I am having trouble getting cuttings from these plants to root. Any suggestions?

—L.V., MORELAND HILLS, OHIO

According to the American Hibiscus Society, some varieties of hibiscus are easier to root than others. But many of the tropical hibiscuses, which are often grown as houseplants in cool-

er climates like yours, root fairly easily. Perlite is a good choice for a rooting medium, and using a rooting hormone usually stimulates root growth in six to eight weeks. It is very important never to let the medium dry out and to keep cuttings in an area where they are provided warm temperatures, high humidity, and moderate light.

Hybrid hibiscuses, however, might be more difficult to root because some have been grafted to specialized rootstocks that are more vigorous than the hybrid and more resistant to soil-borne diseases. For more information on the grafting process and other methods of propagating hibiscuses, visit the American Hibiscus Society Web site americanhibiscus.org/.

SUDDEN OAK DEATH

As a California resident, I have been hearing a lot about sudden oak death. Can you provide some information about this disease?

—P.M., YUBA CITY, CALIFORNIA

First detected in 1995, sudden oak death is a fungal disease that has been identified in attacks on several species of native oak trees that grow along the northern California coast. The suspected pathogen is a new species of the fungus *Phytophthora*, although bark beetles, other fungi, and weather may be exacerbating factors.

Sudden oak death has been linked to the deaths of thousands of tanoaks (*Lithocarpus densiflorus*), coast live oaks (*Quercus agrifolia*), and California black oaks (*Q. kelloggii*) in California, mostly in the San Francisco area. More recently, the disease is suspected to have infected California huckleberry (*Vaccinium ovatum*) and some species of rhododendrons.

The fungus is believed to infect its hosts by entering through the bark, possibly after being splashed there by raindrops during the rainy season. Symptoms of infection include dark sap oozing from the trunk, followed by yellowing and wilting of leaves, and evidence

of bark beetle damage. Once a tree has become infected, its vigor rapidly declines and it becomes vulnerable to secondary infections and insect pests that researchers suspect may be the actual causes of tree death.

The University of California has established a Web site to provide up-to-date information on this serious problem: camfer.cnr.berkeley.edu/oaks/#The_Problem.

IN SEARCH OF A TRUE IDENTITY

Last fall I purchased a plant called "woundwort." This past spring, it came up with wonderful softly hairy foliage and beautiful stalks of flowers. I've been searching for more information about this plant, but I have only found one reference to woundwort, which listed it as *Anthyllis vulneraria*.

—B.M., VIA THE AHS GARDENING
COMMUNITY LISTSERVE

There are a number of plants commonly called some variation of woundwort. Most of them are in the genus *Stachys*, best known for lamb's-ears (*S. byzantina*), and it is likely your plant is in this genus. It could be *S. palustris*, also known as betony and all-heal. It could also be *S. germanica*, known as downy woundwort, or *S. macrantha*, which usually goes by the name big betony. Because *S. macrantha* has the most attractive flowers of these three species, it may be the one you purchased.

Anthyllis vulneraria also goes by the common name woundwort, but it is a leguminous plant that has been used for livestock feed and is not particularly ornamental.

The common name woundwort refers to the historic—and largely archaic—use of the woolly, absorbent leaves of *Stachys* species to staunch bleeding and dress wounds. ☪

*William May, Gardeners Information Service,
and Marianne Polito, Gardeners Information
Service Manager.*

WE'RE READY TO HELP: For answers to your gardening questions, call Gardeners Information Service at (800) 777-7931, extension 131, between 10 a.m. and 4 p.m. Eastern time, or e-mail us anytime at gis@ahs.org.