

# 'Earl of Essex' Bearded Iris

*Two seasons of bloom and an heirloom lineage  
make this perennial worth a second look*

Jimmy Turner



I'm convinced that if bearded irises were finicky, came in fewer colors, were harder to grow, or weren't winter- and summer-hardy, we'd all be lining up to buy them. Instead, we overlook these plants for more exotic possibilities.

Any plant that outlives the gardener and the garden qualifies as "exciting" in my book. But what's new about bearded iris? Well, *Iris* 'Earl of Essex' not only has all the wonderful traits of older bearded irises, but it also has the added bonus of blooming twice a year!

Bearded irises endeared themselves to generations of gardeners in Texas — they're easy to grow, have a tough consti-

proven to perform well here. When I heard about a bearded iris that flowered twice a year, I was curious. A little research revealed that 'Earl of Essex' is bred from *I. kochii*, an old Texas "pass-along" plant. *I. kochii* is a fall-blooming iris native to Italy. Its short, deep-purple flowers mark the remains of old homesteads all over Texas. An enterprising plant breeder used this plant to create 'Earl of Essex' and several other reblooming bearded irises.

'Earl of Essex' has typical iris-shaped white blooms, frosted around the edges with pale lavender-purple. If you prefer pure white flowers, try the variety 'Immortality,' another remontant, or reblooming, variety. In spring, plants send up shoots with 5 to 7 flowers per stem. New shoots continue to appear sporadically throughout summer, with another large flush of bloom in late fall.

In my opinion, bearded irises are underused in today's gardens. But they play a large part in the perennial borders I design. I like them planted *en masse* — when plants are in flower the effect is stunning, and when out of flower the foliage is attractive and low-maintenance.

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tion and the rhizomes quickly form large clumps. Always on the lookout to expand plant choices for Texas gardens, I keep my ears and eyes open for new plants that are bred from ones that have

## AT A GLANCE

**Latin name:** *Iris germanica*

**Common name:** Bearded or German iris

**Flowers:** Large flushes in early spring and late fall, with sporadic flowers throughout summer.

**Foliage:** Semi-evergreen gray-green, spiky, coarse-textured foliage.

**Mature height:** Foliage will reach 24 inches. When in flower, plants peak at 36 inches.

**Hardiness:** Hardy from Zone 4 to 10.

**Soil:** Not particular as long as well-drained.

**Exposure:** Full sun.

**Water usage:** Low, once established.

**Sources:** [www.sheridangardens.com](http://www.sheridangardens.com), [www.vandycks.com](http://www.vandycks.com), and local retailers in spring. See Page 45 for details.

Although this plant requires little care, plant it in an area that drains quickly after a rain. Bearded irises are very susceptible to rotting.

Plants can be purchased as dormant rhizomes or container-grown. In both cases, when planting into the garden, the rhizome should be situated with the top exposed. If they are buried too deeply, the plants will succumb to rot before they can root out. Container-grown plants are sometimes planted too deeply at the nursery and need to be replanted at the correct height. Once established, plants are quite drought-tolerant, but they will benefit from frequent irrigation.

'Earl of Essex' is an upgrade from the standard bearded iris we are familiar with in Texas, combining all the traits that have made them popular with our ancestors, with the added benefit of two seasons of bloom. \*

See Sources, Page 45.

**About the author:** Jimmy Turner is Director of Horticulture Research at The Dallas Arboretum.



Left: 'Earl of Essex' bearded iris boasts lavender-tinged blooms in spring and fall.