

WITH INDIA HURST OF VERVAIN

BEARDED IRISES

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GRACE ALEXANDER · FLOWERS

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PREFACE

I always knew that irises were lovely. Saipua set up whole flower farm because she couldn't buy the perfect brown iris and so she had to grow it. India Hurst of Vervain is obsessed with them. They are both women of exquisite taste. There must be something there.

So when my local iris nursery, Kelways of Langport, sold off a lot of their stock in 2015, I bought a lot of irises. As in, will they all fit in the car a lot. But I never quite knew what to do with them, and they were always slightly in the wrong place; I needed the bed for something else, or the whole field was being dug up and moved around. By the end of last year, I had some unidentified ones in the ground, and about fifty random ones in pots.

The ones that flowered were utterly wonderful and yes, gloriously brown, but I knew I wasn't doing these wonderful plants justice. Who better to ask all the questions you didn't even know you needed to ask than India? A huge thank you to her for her help in putting together this guide.

Consider this *everything* you need to know.

Grace



india hurst of vervain

About us

India Hurst: India Hurst of Vervain is one of the most talented florists working today. She knows how to grow astonishingly beautiful flowers, she knows colours, she knows style and oh my days, does she know bearded irises. There was only one person to talk to about them, and that was India. India also flowers gorgeous weddings, holds workshops and one to ones in her beautiful studio in Worcestershire, and sells perfect vessels, candles, wearables, and paper goods through her online shop at vervainfloraldesign.com Her Instagram is [@vervainflowers](https://www.instagram.com/vervainflowers)

Grace Alexander: Grace knows a bit about the need for escapism. When she isn't packing seeds, turning a back lawn into a kitchen garden, writing books, fermenting compost tea or debating the pros and cons of yellow Pompom dahlias, she is an expert witness psychologist in the UK family courts. The days might be a bit grim, but the weekends are filled with dogs, tea, flowers and the wondrous experience of life in a flower farm.



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A NOTE ON NAMING

You will notice that India is very careful to call these 'bearded irises' and I rather casually call them just 'irises'.

She is correct; we are talking here about bearded irises.

Bearded irises refer to those flowers where the filaments (the hairs that hold up the pollen inside the plant) extend out onto the lower petals, or the 'falls'. It looks like a sort of fuzzy caterpillar and can be a similar colour to the petals or might be alarmingly contrasting.

There are many irises that don't have this, Siberian for example, or *Iris reticulata*, an iris from spring bulbs. These are also lovely, but they just don't have the drama and the majesty of the tall bearded irises, *Iris germanica*.

Oh and they are called irises after the Greek goddess of the rainbow. Every single colour imaginable apart from scarlet.



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INDIA ON IRISES

Grace: I am so delighted to be interviewing India on irises, because she is not only an iris expert, but she is also a full-on iris lover.

India: I think it's turned into more than just a love of irises. I think it's turned into a full-blown obsession, like absolute obsession. I dream about them even. It's got ridiculous.

Grace: I forget every year how beautiful they are. It's the middle of May at the moment and my first ones have just started to really come out, and I remember how much I love them. What is it that you love about them? What makes them so special?

They're just completely over the top and they're outrageous. They come in every possible colour that you can imagine. I can't think of a colourway that doesn't really exist.

And I think that's probably one of the biggest draws; it makes them really inspiring because they create their own colour palette, and then you can build on that. And it's colours you would never think to put together in any other way, because there's literally no other flower that grows in that spectrum of colours.

You can get everything from the deepest inkiest blue to like a perfect, almost like a green, white colour, and there's every single thing in between.

Even the most useful browns, really beautiful colours of pink. Every kind of colour you can imagine and not just solid colours either. 'Just a Crush', for example, the standards are lilac and then they're brown in the middle and then the falls are golden on the outside with a caramel in the middle.

It's just insane. And that they're so ruffled as well, they've got so much texture to them. I don't know if people are put off because of how large they can be, they're quite a large flower. But to me, that's one of the reasons why I love them.

They're like big and bold and the focal point of an arrangement or a vase. The focal point of absolutely anything.



'Just a crush'

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BEARDED IRISES AS A CUT FLOWER

Vase life

Bearded irises make amazing cut flowers.

They are often overlooked, possibly because people think they don't last once cut. Almost all of them have more than one bud on the stem so even when the first flower goes over, there are likely to be two, three, four, maybe even five buds, which are going to gradually open in your vase over the course of a week.

Keep the water fresh, put them out of direct sunlight, and keep deadheading, and you might get a fortnight.

Colourways

If nothing else, irises win the prize for the range of colours in which they exist. They truly do span the rainbow. One of the magical things is that the standards (the petals that go straight upwards) can be one colour, and the falls (the petals that sweep downwards) another. Within the falls can be veining, or shading, or variations from one colour to another.

Grace: The colour of your irises is just beautiful. What varieties have you got there?

India: this one is 'Just A crush'. It is a really beautiful dusky lilac colour. The standards are a lilac at the top and the falls are that kind of beautiful golden colour around the outside, and it's got a little yellow beard which goes really well with it as well.

Grace: I've got a really lovely brown one, which is 'Carnival Time'. it is the most beautiful glossy brown which. Brown irises are very, very highly sought after. I happen to know you have one of the only true Brown irises in the UK don't you?

India: I do. I do. It's like my absolute baby and I love it. It's such a beautiful colour. It's one of those ones where it's pretty hard to describe and when you take pictures of it, you're not really kind of getting exactly the kind of colours of it. It's a really deep, muddy brown when it opens and then as it fades, it almost goes to a kind of dusty grey. A dry, earthy, kind of brown. It's just beautiful. It's called 'Downtown Brown'. So it's also got a great name, which most of the flowers have.

Honestly, there's some of the most ridiculous names I've ever heard for irises. I think that's half the fun of them is that some of them are really stupidly named. And then when they open and you're like, honestly, how did you get that name?

Grace: So this one is 'Champagne Elegance', which sounds terribly, terribly lovely. The standards are a really soft lilac, which is not generally my colour, but the falls are a pale, pale caramel which just soften it. You're right, I would never put lilac and sort of champagne colour together, but they just work perfectly.

And this is 'Frappe', which is meant to be a very, very soft pink but with the weather that we've had it's got a bit of rain damage so it's a bit pale. If I leave these ones inside, will these come out differently?

India: Yes, they will come out a slightly different colour when they start coming out inside. Yeah, but it's a beautiful one. I like that you've already thought about your kind of palette, whereas I just literally ordered everything I possibly can. And so when they open it, it's like almost too much; there's so many clashing when it's all happening. It's just a little bit intense...

Scent

India: Some people just look at bearded irises and think that they are too much, that they are too gawdy and over the top and too colourful and too big. Although those are all

of the reasons why I love them so much, there are other reasons to love them too. They are all scented. Not many people consider this but they smell beautiful. Every single variety that I've got is scented and they all have a slightly different scent. Downton Brown has a fruity chocolatey smell. Some other are really, really citrusy. They all have a slightly similar base smell, but with different notes.

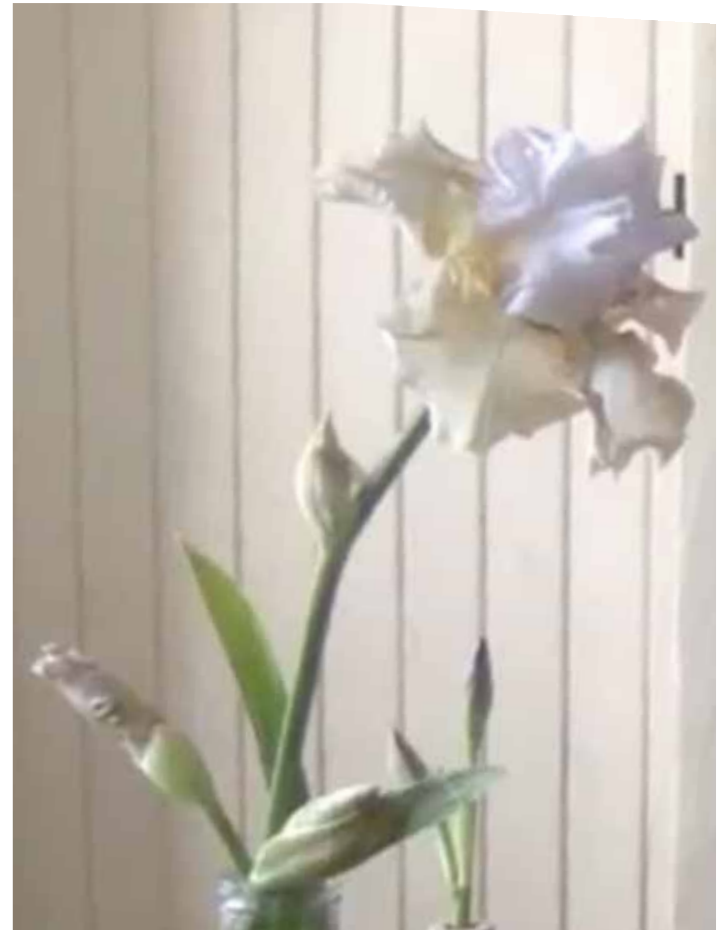
When to cut

The best time for longest vase life is to cut when most of the bud is colour, but when the flower isn't out yet. But even if you cut in full flower, it'll last well on the kitchen table and, as discussed above, for most of the season there will be other buds to come after it anyway.

Grace: One of my questions is about conditioning and the point at which you cut. And I have to say, I'd never be brave enough to cut before the bud was completely closed, but my general rule of thumb with most things like roses is as soon as you can see a bit of colour, you're probably quite good.

India: Yes. I would say with irises to wait slightly longer. So to the stage where there's quite a lot of colour showing, and then it's probably still one or two days off flowering and that's probably the point in which I would normally cut it if I am going to use it for something. Although if I'm picking it to

Top left: Just a Crush. Top right: Champagne Elegance. Bottom left: Carinval Time. Bottom right: Frappe



put it in the house, I normally pick it when it's out, just because I know that it's going to last for a few days anyway.

Grace: I have to say even that the colour on the buds is just beautiful. There's so much veining and so much detail.

India: It's so fun to watch how they change. So, so many of them start off like a certain colour when they're in bud, then as they open, it's like unfurling. The colour starts to change and you can notice all these other colours as it opens up.

I've got variety of one that when it's in bud, it's lime green, a really intense lime green. Then as it slowly opens, it goes to a chartreuse yellow-green colour. And then it goes to gold. So it's just every bit of those stage and experiences are beautiful. So of course I'm out there every 10 minutes just watching!

Deadheading

I (Grace) will confess it took me longer than it should have done to work this out. You can keep irises going for really quite some time by deadheading. Clicking off the spent flower kicks the next bud behind it into action.

The first flower might be out for four or five days and if there is a bud behind it that can give you another four or five days that is very wonderful indeed.

The first flower is over when it starts to go limp and turn in on itself. If you leave it longer, it goes a rather strange texture, sort of gooey and wet. You do need to remove this flower quite carefully so as not to damage the bud behind it although by the time the first flower is far over, the bud behind should be quite fully formed. The flower will snap off just underneath the developing seeds, so expect to get some green part too.

I deadhead in the garden as well as in the vase. It is an immensely satisfying task and I cannot recommend it enough.

Reblooming

Some bearded irises will re-flower naturally after a hot summer. To maximise your chance of getting a second flush, make sure you cut the flower spikes right back. As if any of mine would be left standing...



Bridal bouquet by India with flying solo, purr & bees knees

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TYPES OF BEARDED IRISES

There are more types than you ever thought possible, mostly divided into categories of height. The taller ones need more space, so if you have a smaller growing space, you might be better off going for a standard dwarf.

From smallest to biggest, the types are:

miniature dwarf bearded irises [10 – 20cm]

standard dwarf bearded irises [21-40cm tall]

intermediate bearded irises [38cm to 71cm]

mini tall bearded irises [38cm to 71cm]

border bearded irises [38cm to 71cm]

tall bearded irises [anything over 71cm]

I know, there are three types that are all roughly the same size. They are however slightly different in their habit and their form.

All you need to know is that if you have a garden that is too windy for a tall iris, or you don't want to block out a view, you have a lot of options in the intermediates, the borders and the mini-talls.

So the majority of what both India and I grow are tall bearded irises, because most of the most extravagant varieties are of this type and they are the most impressive. They can get to between 35 and 45 inches from rhizome to top of flower.

Standard dwarves

The standard dwarf bearded iris is a great one for people that maybe don't have much space because you can get lots of beautiful colours and those amazing variations with the standard dwarf ones, just like you can with the tall ones.

India recommends: 'Overcast' as a gorgeous standard dwarf. 'Purr' for its veining and the purpley blue tinge to its beard, and 'Hocus Pocus' for just being lovely.

'Langport Storm' is also a beautiful dwarf. Langport is a town local to me (Grace) and is the home of Kelways of Langport. This nursery bred irises in the post-war years and created a strain of mostly intermediate varieties by crossing dwarf and tall. 'Langport Wren' is the most famous, but it is worth looking out for any of the Langport strains.



'Flying Solo'

Intermediate bearded irises

These are the next one up from the standard dwarf in size. They are extremely prolific and pack a lot of bang for their buck. Great for adding colour in a garden when every plant has to be robust.

India recommends:

Flying Solo

Tall bearded irises

The big ones. True *Iris germanica*. These grow tall and so need more space than the others, but whatever ground you can spare them, they will repay in buckets.

INDIA RECOMMENDS:

Burnt Toffee
Distant Chimes
Bayberry Candle
Champagne Elegance

I absolutely second Champagne Elegance as a wonderful flower, although my heart (and my field) belong to Iris 'Carnival Time'. It has spread in the area in which I planted it and to describe it as abundant doesn't begin to describe how gloriously thick it is now. Not the easiest to source, but Irises of Sissinghurst does have it.

GRACE RECOMMENDS:

Sultan's Palace
Action Front
Langport Wren
Pink charm

OTHERS TO CONSIDER:

Just a Crush
Mortality – a good one for re-blooming
Nestucca Rapids & News Blue for cooler blues.

Top left: Burnt Toffee. Top right: Distant Chimes. Bottom left: Bayberry Candle. Bottom right: Champagne Elegance



Top left: Sultan's Palace. Top right: Action Front. Bottom left: Langport Wrene. Bottom right: Pink Charm



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GROWING GUIDE

Grace: Although I love them and they are so beautiful, one of my problems with irises, the thing that I grapple with is how much space they take up. Because the one thing that I know about growing irises is that the rhizomes should be on the surface of the soil and they should be baked in the sun. But does that mean I can't plant anything in between them or around them? Do they need a bed of their own? In which case that feels like a massive commitment for a flower that, although it is astonishingly beautiful has quite a short flowering window and really isn't cut and come again.

India: I think that does definitely put quite a lot of people off. But I always look at the fact that it doesn't really take up any more room than say a peony does, and you don't really get anything else from a peony after a few weeks in June. Only they're far more exciting than peonies. I am very biased, and I'm not a massive peony fan, but they are similar; they need a similar sort of amount of space. So if you can make room for a peony in your garden, you can definitely make room for an iris in your garden.

They don't need a bed to themselves, we do plant them in the border. You just need to be aware of where you're putting it. You are completely right. they don't want to be

overshadowed and you don't want to grow things in between them. Believe me, I've learned that lesson. I planted a bed and I thought, Oh, I'll just plant some annuals in between after they finished. And it just absolutely wasn't ok because it just caused them to get the kind of fungal spot disease a lot earlier in the season because they were damp, and because they weren't getting the heat and the light on the rhizomes.

So, if you're going to grow it because you want a bed of irises and you want to use them as cut flowers or you just want to enjoy them en masse, on their own, and you've got space to do that, then that is a hundred percent of the best way to grow them.

If you want to just add them to your garden, I would suggest putting them on the edge of your borders or on a corner somewhere where they're not going to get completely encroached. It doesn't matter if they get a little bit overshadowed, they ideally want as many hours of sunlight in a day as you can provide them. But if they have a little bit of shade, it's not going to kill them. They just might not bulk up as much or produce as many flower stems as if they were getting

baked for hours and hours a day.

So I wouldn't say that you shouldn't put them in the garden. There's a couple that are in our garden here at my parents' and they're huge. They're amazing. They look brilliant and yeah, that they're doing fine. They've got plants around them and they're happy and they're just thriving. They have their own space.

So they've just got some at the edge of the border, and they have created their own little alcove as well. A good way of planting them if you've got a few, is plant them so the rhizomes are facing in. So, you're almost creating that shelter from everything else in the border by their leaves.

In terms of getting the conditions right for bearded irises, they're not as tricky as everybody thinks. As long as that the rhizome is exposed, they're in a sunny position, and as long as it's not sat in heavy soil. The soil needs to be well-drained, but it still needs to be getting water. It's that usual thing, moist, but well-drained which is a contradiction, isn't it? Then they're just going to do their thing.

I treat mine like children and absolutely coddle the hell out of them and it drives everybody nuts, but that's just because I've got a crazy obsession with them and I need to make sure that they're fine.

Grace: I confess I absolutely do not coddle mine, and mine are also fine! I have two box-lined beds. One of them has a lot of Chelsea plants, quite densely planted. Ravenswing, foxgloves, and lots and lots of irises. I've just been out looking at it and they're all absolutely huge, just growing through everything else. So, I think I'm probably going to hedge my bets a bit and move some of them in the designated border, but I also might leave some there because they're clearly doing so, so well.

Dividing

India recommends splitting and dividing bearded irises every three to five years. If you leave it too long, the rhizomes become really overcrowded which is going to reduce the amount of flower stems you get. Strangely, bearded irises do quite like jostling for space a bit, but not to the point where it then really overcrowded.

I (Grace) used to just dig up, pull apart and replant. The pulling apart is a weirdly satisfying task and as the roots are quite shallow, it is an easy job. However, I have been convinced by Doddington Hall to try their method, which leaves much of the plant in situ. He recommends doing it immediately after flowering, as doing it in autumn disturbs them at just the point that they are getting set up for the next year's flowering.

A description of how to use this method is here:

<https://www.rhs.org.uk/gardens/partner-gardens/articles/doddington-hall-s-top-iris-tips>

Cutting back

At the end of the season, India recommends cutting the foliage right back. The best time to do this is when they start to go yellow or they start getting fungal spots on the leaves and there is evidence of them dying back, cut them back to a couple of inches above the rhizome.

If you do that too early, then you're stopping the sunlight and nutrients that the leaves are picking up feeding that rhizome. So if you've cut it back too early, split it a little bit too much or maybe put it in a pot where the conditions aren't right (see below) then you're going to struggle to get any decent flowers off it in the first year. All is not lost though, if they are getting enough sunshine, they will soon bulk up enough to give a great show the year after.

Pest & problems

Grace: When I asked for any questions about irises, one came up more than any other. What's eating them?

India: It is very likely slugs. Slugs absolutely love them. It's literally their favourite snack ever. So if you have slugs in the garden, then it is likely they're going to make a beeline for your bed of irises.

I've had quite a few issues with slugs before, and for some reason they just love biting the stem off and they like to do it just before it's going to flower. You are so excited for your iris to flower and then suddenly it's lying on the floor next to it, because the slugs nibble up the stems.

And so all the usual slug rules apply. Clear beds. No edging to your beds, no wood, no pots.

Bearded Irises must enjoy full sun and sharp drainage. They disdain the miseries of shade and clay. Interplant Bearded Irises with plants with scanty foliage: alpine pinks, late flowering alliums....

Wootens Plants



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GROWING IN POTS

Grace: For those of us with limited space, with only courtyard gardens, or those who might be on the move in the near future, what about pots. I was moving many of mine around a year or so ago and just couldn't decide what to do with them. I pretended I was going to sell them, which was problematic as I had absolutely no idea what they were. Did I mention you should label them in flower? So I filled quite big pots with compost, laid the rhizomes on the surface, and put them in my sunniest, hottest, place in the garden. They have done absolutely nothing in terms of flowering although they look quite well in themselves.

India: Exactly the same. This pot was one of the ones that was divided last year, so probably similar time to you, I think it was late August. We did them in August when we took all of them up and we split all of them, and then that's when I sold a few.

So this was one of the ones where it was a potluck because I have no idea what it was going to do, and because I'd lost the labels for basically half a bed full of them. So this one, it could be anything. So this is just one single rhizome that got split off another one. Most of my other ones are in a pot with quite a lot of rhizomes, which is kind of better because they don't want too much compost and rich nutrition.

Grace: So if mine haven't flowered, do they not like the pot? Have I done something wrong?

India: So they don't really like being in a pot. They just aren't a fan of it. So mine are just all in pots this year, because I had a bit of a space issue this year, and I knew that the beds that they were in I needed to use for annuals this year. So mine all went in pots just as a temporary kind of arrangement, but they don't really like being in pots; they'd much prefer to be in soil. So if you've got the option to put them in the soil and in their own bed, then definitely I would say do that. If you can't, they will flower in the pots. With mine, 80%, maybe 70%, are going to flower in the pots. However, they're not going to flower particularly well, that's the only thing I would say. They're going to flower slightly shorter and I think they'll be maybe a little bit more brittle in the stems as well.

So they don't love it in pots, I think because whatever compost you put them in is probably going to be slightly too rich for them. They like low nitrogen kind of feed, so or no feed at all. Often the compost that you're potting them up into is already going

to have more nitrogen and more kind of other elements in it and it's probably going to be a bit strong for them.

Also your pots are going to hold moisture more, and they're going to dry out quicker. So they're not going to have the regular kind of moisture level that they'd like to have. They get too damp and then too dry and then too damp again.

Also, often with the pots, if they're a bit too crowded or they're not necessarily the right place in the garden, then they still might not be getting enough sun.

Picture on next page is 'Pink Charm' grown by Grace.



07

WHERE TO SEE & SOURCE

The irises are in flower at the moment (May-June) but the best time to plant bearded irises is the autumn so many nurseries will generally sell rhizomes bare rooted towards the end of the summer. Occasionally they will come in small pots.

Lots of the nurseries have open days or are open for NGS. Make your wish-list and get your order in now, whilst you can see what the glorious colours in real life. If you can't visit, then many of their Instagram feeds, as well as their websites, are absolutely stuffed full of wonderful pictures.

If you are buying in person, look for good sized rhizomes that are firm to the touch. Small rhizomes will take years to flower.

Vervain are likely to have some irises for sale later in the year, so keep an eye out.

*Chailey's Iris garden
Lewes*

*Sissinghurst irises
[Lots of dwarves]*

*Claire Austin
[Online only]*

Cayeux



*& that is everything I know about irises.
A huge thank you to India Hurst
of Vervain.*