

Dealing with Rotting Rhizomes

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Edited by Harriet Robinson)*

Is anyone else having trouble with rotting TB (tall bearded) rhizomes? The first sign is that leaves cut short last fall are brown. When I reach to pull them off, I find them rotten. When I touch the rhizome, I can scoop the mush right out with my finger. So what's going on? This is not the first spring I have had this disappointment.

On line sources, such as the American Iris Society website, suggest that the culprit is bacterial soft rot. This disease is supposedly smelly. My affected iris have no odor. Remedies include removing the rot, sanitizing the remaining healthy tissue with bleach, and sprinkling Comet on the surrounding dirt, which may have the bacterium.



Miss California rotting in Maine. Note the fallen fan.
Some mush was scooped out of the rhizome

I checked with experienced Maine iris grower, Peter Young. I described the problem and suggested that some rhizomes just can't stand up to our cold wet springs. I don't think I have bacterial rot. I think I have some irises that are less hardy. Peter agreed that parentage and hybridizer have a lot to do with it. I have some offsets that are starting to grow on some of them and wondered if they would be OK. Peter said that secondary shoots will be the ones to bloom next year. I wonder if they will be

the rhizomes to rot next season before they ever get a chance to bloom. Peter said I may want to go ahead and replace them with something that is hardy here. His advice: it may depend on how much you have invested. My plan: I am going to stick to our auction and swap for irises that grew well in Maine (or the grower would not have had them to donate!) I'll bet our door prize list is "safe" too. Even old heritage irises, strong as iron where they were hybridized, might perish for us.

For those of you who want the newest pretty faces, follow what Peter recommends and order from hybridizers who face similar growing conditions to ours. Further research into the parents of the irises you like could lead you to some gorgeous hardy irises from elsewhere.