

Should Irises be Cut Back?

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edited by Harriet Robinson)*

Many growers routinely cut back bearded iris to an inverted V or fan (although the fan shape isn't necessary, it looks nice). This is done primarily to avoid a foliage mess that may harbor disease. Some growers regularly cut back all leaves, especially prior to winter. Cutting leaves and pulling off dead ones makes a garden look nicer when the foliage looks ratty in late summer. Note that the bloom stalk leaves will die. If the stalk was not already cut or snapped off, it should be (unless you are waiting for seeds to ripen).

If bearded irises are growing in good health, they might need not be cut back during the growing season. Unfortunately, leaf spot and other fungal diseases can sometimes attack the leaves, and many growers contain these problems by cutting off the diseased portions of leaves. This is probably the best for the plants, preserving all the green leaves possible while containing disease. Leaves that are completely brown on the outside of fans may be pulled off. The outside leaves when dead easily pull off in the direction of the mother rhizome.



Top left, an SDB with browning foliage (TB foliage can be much rattier); top right, peeling back a dead leaf; and bottom, leaves clipped gives a nicer appearance in the garden

Foliage of beardless iris turns brown in the fall, usually after the first killing frost, and should be cut back to an inch or two. Beardless varieties like Siberian Irises and Japanese Irises regularly turn brown in the fall, some time between the first frost and six weeks later when they should be cut back to an inch or two.

During the division process you should cut back iris to 5"–9" depending on the size of the plant, both bearded and beardless. New roots can only support a reduced leaf mass, and smaller fans are less likely to blow over in winds. Leave enough foliage to continue the photosynthesis process.