

Handbook For Judges and Show Officials

Essay: Comparison of BB, IB, & MTB Iris



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Note: This chapter and others from the *Handbook for Judges* are available online. It is recommended that judges and other readers look over the Introduction and Table of Contents in the full edition of the *Handbook* in order to know the complete list of available resources, e.g., Glossary, essays, Judge's Activity Record, etc.

This essay is recommended reading before Ch 8 BB Iris, Ch 9 IB Iris and Ch 10 MTB Iris.

ESSAY: Comparison of BB, IB and MTB Iris Prelude to Chapters 8, 9 and 10

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Although border bearded (BB), intermediate bearded (IB), and miniature tall bearded (MTB) iris all have the same height range, the classes have a number of distinctions that should be emphasized to the judges. This essay will assist the judge with understanding those distinctions. Judges are encouraged to review this chapter before working with Chapters 8, 9 and 10.

Border Bearded Iris, Chapter 8

BBs were originally small cultivars chosen from pure TB breeding. As a consequence, they bloom with the tall bearded iris (TB), have the sophisticated flower forms and branch habit of the TBs, and are as fertile as the TBs from which they were derived. More recently, hybridizers have added species such as *Iris aphylla*, *I. balkana* and *I. reichenbachii* or utilized some of the fertile IB plants in crosses with BBs or TBs. These sorts of crosses have helped improve the vigor and branching of the plants. However, finished BBs are rarely from first-generation crosses with species. BBs that include species in the pedigree should have the sophisticated flower forms that are found in the BBs derived from straight TB breeding.

Because BBs generally bloom with the TBs, they are suitable for planting in front of TBs in the iris beds or at corners of beds. In windy climates, BBs are useful alternatives to TBs because their shorter stalks rarely fall over even when in full bloom. Although some BBs are as vigorous as the IBs, most good BBs have the vigor of typical TBs.

Both IB and BB classes have similar requirements for proportion. Roughly the height of the stalk should equal three to three and a half times the sum of height and width of the blossom. In other words, the best overall proportion should be: $3 \text{ to } 3.5 \times (\text{height} + \text{width of blossom}) = \text{the height of the stalk}$.

Intermediate Bearded Iris, Chapter 9

IBs are intermediate in size and bloom season between the standard dwarf bearded (SDB) and tall bearded (TB) classes. This intermediate bloom season is relatively well defined in the East and Midwest, where they fill in the two- to three-week gap between the main SDB peak bloom period and the TB peak. However, the intermediate bloom season is blurred both in warmer climates and where seasonal weather is highly variable.

IBs are generally hybrids that contain a dwarf species or members of the miniature dwarf bearded (MDB) or SDB classes, and a TB or BB parent, if not in the first generation then in previous generations. This hybrid nature results in plants that are characterized by tremendous vigor, competing well with other perennials in mixed perennial borders and producing abundant bloom. Early IBs were derived from TB crossed with *chamaeiris*-type dwarfs and were nearly sterile. Most present-day IBs are first-generation hybrids between TBs and SDBs. These are not quite as sterile as earlier IBs, but they are not easily fertile, thus there are few IBs that are derived from IB X IB crosses.

As the flower form of SDB and TB parents has improved, present-day IBs have been developed with more sophisticated flower forms, appearing more like the BBs. However, there is no preference for this type over IBs with less sophisticated flowers which are more typical of the dwarfs. Another line of IBs has been derived from *Iris aphylla*. These IBs often have a balanced set of chromosomes and improved fertility, enabling the development of advanced-generation hybrids. The *aphylla*-derived hybrids are often very well branched and can even have the extra basal branch typical of the species. This branching habit is distinct from the straighter, more closely-branched stalk typical of IBs from a TB X SDB breeding.

This complexity of background produces a variety of acceptable IB forms, in terms of flower form and branch habit. These give the gardener a whole series of looks, from plants ranging in height from not much taller than SDBs, with numerous straight stalks and limited branching, to plants at the upper end of the height range with proportionately larger flowers, with or without highly branched stalks. All fall within the IB class as long as the core requirements for vigor and abundant bloom are met.

Thus, the BBs and IBs differ in terms of origins, bloom seasons, garden uses, and sophistication of the flower.

Miniature Tall Bearded Iris, Chapter 10

The MTB class is distinct from both the IB and BB classes in terms of flower size and the thinness of the stalk, for an overall look that is dainty. Flowers should have a combined height + width (measured from fall tip to fall tip in its natural position) of 6 inches (15 cm) or less. A rough rule of thumb for proportion is $4 \text{ or } 4.5 \times (\text{height} + \text{width of blossom}) = \text{height of the stalk}$.

In general, the flowers of the diploid MTBs resemble delicate versions of the diploid TBs of the early 20th century and have a wildflower look. Most are tailored or only lightly ruffled. Tetraploid MTBs derived from crosses involving BBs and species such as *Iris aphylla* will have wider flower parts and more of the colors and patterns seen in the BBs and TBs. As long as the flowers measure in class and the overall proportion is good, these wider and fuller flowers should not be penalized.

Stalks should be pencil slim, about $\frac{1}{4}$ " in diameter below the terminal flower, and the stalk should be relatively flexuous, with branches well-spaced and above the foliage. Tetraploid MTBs derived from *I. aphylla* and diploids derived from *I. astrachanica* may have a basal branch at the bottom of the stalk, making them broader at the base, but the stem should be suitably narrow at all points above this point. Although most of the diploid MTBs are good fits for the class, many tetraploid MTBs will grow taller or produce bigger flowers than is acceptable in the class. If they are consistently out of class, they could be re-classified as IBs or BBs rather than MTBs and should not win awards as MTBs. Many of the newer tetraploids are conforming more closely to the conception of the class as originally established by Williamson and White.

MTBs can be very effective plants in the mixed perennial border and in smaller or narrower beds where larger iris would be too large for the space. Although the diploid MTBs bloom mostly within the TB season, many of the tetraploid varieties start blooming with the late IBs and extend into TB season. Because of their thin, flexuous stalks, MTBs are one of the best bearded iris for those who work with flower arrangements. In fact, their original name of "table iris" reflects this important use of these flowers.

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