Orris

*Iris germanica var. florentina*
[Eye-ris jer-MAN-ih-kuh]
(previously *Iris florentina*)

**Family:** Iridaceae

**Names:** Iris, flag iris, pale iris, orris butter, Queen Elizabeth root, Florentine Iris; Schwertillie (German); iris (French); giaggolo (Italian)

**Description:** Tall leaves growing in clumps with a height of 2 1/2 feet and a width of 1 foot. The flowers are typical iris flowers with large, very thin petals that fall back, white with traces of blue or purple inside. The leaves are stiff, sword-shaped, pointed and standing upright. blooms from April to June.

**Cultivation:** A perennial to Zone 4-5. Space at foot in soil that is well drained, dry, limey and acrid, deep and rich with a pH of 7.5-8.5. Requires full sun or partial shade in hot climates. Propagate by seed, which is sown in summer, but more often by rhizome division, best done immediately after flowering. It is best to divide them every 3-4 years since they are heavy feeders and produce fewer blooms in the center patch. Don’t bury the rhizomes deeply, or they will produce more foliage than flowers. Rhizomes are ready to harvest in 3 years and should be aged at least 2 years to develop their violetlike aroma. Individual flowers live 3-5 days. To harvest, lift and dry the root of a three-year-old orris plant. Scrape or lightly peel the roots and dry in a low oven with the door ajar. When dry, the roots will be hard and woody. The longer they are kept, the more pronounced their perfume. Use a small milling machine to grind to a fine powder.

**History:** In ancient Greece and Rome orris root was used extensively in perfumery and its medicinal qualities were held in high esteem by Dioscorides. In Egypt in 1540BC, when pharaoh Thatmosis I had it depicted on the walls of the temple at Karnak. Iris, which means “rainbow” in Greek, describes the varied colors of the flowers, although their iris may have referred to all plants with swordlike leaves. Arabs planted them in Moorish Spain. Orris was one of the favorite flowers in medieval English and French gardens. It had been the coat of arms of the Frankish king, Clovis I. One version of his story is that orris saved his army when he saw it growing in a river as a sign they could safely cross. In 12th century France, it became the fleur-de-lys, or “flower of Louis VII.” The flower was also adopted by England’s Edward III when he claimed the French throne in 1339 and then by Charles V of France and it remained in the Royal Arms until 1800. By the 19th-century, orris cultivation had become a major Italian industry. Orris flavors brandy and drinks. In Russia the root was used to make a tonic drink with honey and ginger.
Medicinal Uses: Orris was formerly used in upper respiratory tract catarrh, coughs and for diarrhea in infants. It was used to treat dropsy and has been used as a snuff for congestive headaches. DRIED ROOT, preferably aged for at least 2 years. ½ to 1 teaspoon in warm water as suspended tea; the pressed "fingers" for teething infants to gum on. Although sometimes a topical allergen, it is not so internally.

Aromatherapy:
EXTRACTION: An essential oil (concrete) by steam distillation from the rhizomes that have been peeled, washed, dried and pulverized. The rhizomes must be stored for a minimum of three years prior to extraction otherwise they have no scent. An absolute produced by alkali washing in ethyl ether solution to remove the myristic acid from the ‘concrete’ oil A resin or resinoid by alcohol extraction from the peeled rhizomes.

CHARACTERISTICS: The oil solidifies at room temperature to a cream-colored mass with a woody, violet-like scent and a soft, floral-fruity undertone. The absolute is a water-white or pale yellow oily liquid with a delicate, sweet, floral-woody odor. The resin is a brown or dark orange viscous mass with a deep, woody-sweet, tobacco-like scent—very tenacious.

BLENDS WITH: cedarwood, sandalwood, vetiver, cypress, mimosa, labdanum, bergamot, clary sage, rose, violet and other florals.

ACTIONS: dried root—antidiarrheal, demulcent, expectorant. Fresh root—diuretic, cathartic, emetic

CONSTITUENTS: myristic acid, an odorless substance that makes the ‘oil’ solid, alpha-iron and oleic acid

Cosmetic Uses: Orris used to provide an “instant” shampoo that removed grease and scented the hair. In the 18th-century, it was one ingredient in hair-whitening powder. It is chewed as a breath freshener and in some dentifrice powders. Juice is used to lighten freckles.

RECIPE: Dusting powder: Mix 1 lb of orris root powder with 5 lb of rich starch and add a few drops of otto of bergamot orange and of cloves, mixing well. It should be kept in a box with a tight fitting lid and should be applied to the body with a large puff.

Dentifrice: Take 1 lb of precipitated chalk, mix 1 oz powdered rice starch and 1 oz powdered orris root.

Almond Bath Milk: 16 Tbsp almond meal, 16 Tbsp orris root, 1 pint milk
Whisk all the ingredients together for several minutes, until they are well blended. Pot up, label and refrigerate. Add a cupful to the warm bath water. Soak for at least 15 minutes.

Eau de Bergamot: 2 tsp bergamot oil, 1¼ tsp sweet orange oil, 2½ tsp orris, 7 drops rosemary oil, 1½ tsp lemon oil, 1¼ tsp benzoin, 50 drops neroli oil, 2½ pints alcohol. Place all the ingredients together in an airtight container and let them macerate for six months. Shake the container every day. After this time has elapsed, strain, bottle and label. Store in a cool dark place.

Ritual Uses: Gender: Feminine. Planet: Venus. Element: Water. Deity: Iris, Juna. Part Used: Root. Basic Power: Love, Purification, Wisdom. Carry the root to find a loved one. Add powdered orris to love sachets and baths. Add to lavender and rosebuds to make a sachet to lay among clothes infusing them with the scent of love. Use in small quantities in love incenses to fumigate the house before dates. Take orrisroot and blend with rice powder. Dust on your body and the bed sheets as desired. The three points of its flower symbolize faith, wisdom and valor, and so can be used to induce these qualities.

Other Uses: Orris is a popular fixative for potpourris and is found in most 19th- and 20th-century formulas. It is carved into fragrant rosary beads and provides teething sticks for babies. The rhizome produces a gray-black dye
when used with an iron mordant. The resin is used in soaps, colognes and perfumes; the absolute and ‘concrete’ oil are reserved for high-class perfumery work. Occasionally used in Europe for confectionery and fruit flavors. Put 1 tsp powdered orris root into the final rinsing water in the washing machine.

**Toxicity:** The fresh root causes nausea and vomiting in large doses. The oil and absolute are often adulterated or synthetic. True orris absolute is three times the price of jasmine.

**References:**


**Resources:**

- Companion Plants, [www.companionplants.com](http://www.companionplants.com)

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