

## Plant Profiles: Variegated *Iris*



### [Iris](#)

Drawing by

[Rene](#)

[Eisenbart](#)

### **Bulbous plant**

The goddess Iris was an Olympian messenger, and boy, was she a hooper. Day after day, she walked the rainbow that bridged heaven and earth. As you might expect with all that walking, she often picked up rainbow pieces on the soles of her feet, so that wherever she walked on Earth, her footprints bore flowers in all the colors of the rainbows she'd traveled. We call those flowers iris.

From time to time, though, our Iris would overdo it on the nectar, cross the rainbow's median strip, and pick up white or yellow lines. Eventually, those lines showed up in the plants' leaves. We call those plants variegated iris.

What, you'd rather have me tell you that the variegation in an iris is either a genetic mutation or a disfiguring plant virus? Tough way to sell you a plant!

Like most variegated plants, the striped iris are grown for their foliage rather than for their flowers - which is a good thing in the case of the exquisite though unreasonably rare *Iris foetidissima* 'Variegata', since its pale mauve flowers are unlikely to attract attention. All the better, though, to enjoy its dramatic eighteen-inch evergreen leaves, brilliant fans of white-streaked foliage that blend with anything in summer, bring drama to winter, and thrive in shade.

*Iris pallida* 'Argentea Variegata' is another stunner, this one with showier lilac-blue flowers that smell like grape juice. Its flat, blue-green foliage striped silvery white remains interesting spring through fall, in either sun or light shade. Incidentally, the Latin word *argentea* means "silver", an important point to remember when shopping for *Iris pallida*, because another variety, 'Aurea Variegata', is the same plant striped with yellow. Choosing between the two is largely a question of aesthetics and of which works better in your garden.

In the category, Variegated Iris with Most Dramatic Flower, the winner is *Iris laevigata* 'Variegata', familiarly known (in which circles I know not) as "variegated rabbit ears." Midnight-purple flowers jump out from a three- to five-foot plant known for its particularly clean variegation. It's happiest with its head in the sun and its feet moist or sopping wet.

Perhaps the finest of the standing-water iris is the big and bold *I. pseudacorus* 'Variegata', incredibly easy to grow and amazingly satisfying in flower, its bright-yellow blooms echoed in its arching, striped, five-foot leaves. The variegated yellow flag is virescent (meaning that its leaves revert to green by summer), but that should not dissuade you from including it in your pond for its overall exuberance and reliable spring show.

Incidentally, when that roving goddess cooled her feet in American lakes and marshes, she left us with a superb selection of native water-loving iris. By that time, though, she'd laid off the nectar; to date, none of our natives have road-stripped leaves.

Plant Profiles are excerpted from [\*Plant This!\*](#) by Ketznel Levine