



Planting Irises

Gardening with my mother. By William Way

How deep do you want me to go?" "About six inches," my mother replies. She and I are in the country, about two hours north of San Francisco. It is winter and we're planting iris bulbs for the spring.

I dig the hole as directed, then spread black compost at the bottom. The soil itself is red, thick with clay. My mother is transforming her two acres bit by bit into a lush garden. All around us, pines and junipers climb to the sky, some as high as 20 feet.

"Add some bonemeal," she says, and passes me the bag. I scoop out a couple of handfuls of the gray-brown, gritty stuff and mix it with the compost in the hole.

Next she gives me the bucket of iris bulbs I've dug up and separated. I place each rhizome in the hole with its small green shoot pointing upward. We fit about six in the hole.

"That should do it," I tell her. We pour more compost over everything until the hole is completely filled. Months from today, the irises should be blooming, purple and bearded. Already, the tulips close to the little white house my mother and father have lived in for a decade are sprouting. They should bloom within the month.

My mother, like her father before her, has been gardening all her life. One day I will inherit this land. Then it will be mine to cut the roses and the Russian sage back for winter, to plant the zinnias and the poppies, to water the rosemary, and to chase the deer from the olive tree.

Now my mother is acquainting me with the tasks I need to learn so that I may someday fill her shoes and bring color and life to this rather dry region of rocks and pasture grass.

My mother and I have always been best friends. I lend a sympathetic ear to her quotidian complaints about my father while making her laugh at my off-color jokes. Sometimes she calls me Sweet William, the name of a flower she grows in a little square by the house next to hollyhocks, geraniums, and cosmos.

We water the patch of earth where the irises will soon awaken, and, with shovel and wheelbarrow and bonemeal and bulbs, walk to another likely planting spot. Together. ❖

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