

Monday, March 29, 2010

Butterfly or African Iris (Dietes)

Dietes, or Butterfly Iris, is an iris relative, originally from South Africa, and it has been appearing more frequently in south Texas landscapes in the last few years. It is perfectly adapted to gardens in warm climates in zones 8 and 9 and is found from Florida to California. The Butterfly, or African Iris, are composed of several species of the genus *Dietes*. Their slowly increasing clumps of narrow, sword-like foliage usually remain green through out the winter unless burnt by extended temperatures below 25 F. *Dietes* have the ability to grow up to 4 feet under ideal conditions of regularly moist soils, but are usually about 2.5 to 3 feet in height in areas like ours where normal conditions are much drier.

Dietes have evergreen rhizomes and resemble their iris relatives in having upright, spiky leaves and flower stalks bearing a succession of blooms, usually lasting only one or two days over a long period of time. They can adjust to different light conditions, however, they will provide more blooms, more often, if they are placed in full sun. The *Dietes* bicolor, also known as Yellow Morea and Wild Iris, have flowers that are yellow with dark brown or maroon blotches, that serve as nectar guides. The flowers occur on and off throughout the year. Plants spread by means of thick rhizomes and can be propagated by division. Extension educators in Florida recommend that you establish *Dietes* in containers for a year or so, before moving them back into the soil once they are divided. Another close relative, *Dietes iridioides*, known as African iris, is white with dark brown blotches.

Ideal growing conditions for *Dietes* would eliminate all of the calcium (salt) in our soils and water. This plant truly does not appreciate our salty conditions. The best way around this is to amend your soils with about 25% organic matter, in the form of compost. Place 4 to 5 inches of compost on top of the bed and work into the soil completely. You should apply compost to the top of beds at least twice per year. If the beds have wood mulch, just pull the mulch back, top dress with compost, and replace the mulch over it.

Dietes will not tolerate heavy, wet soils. They must have good drainage. When first planted, you will have to water on a regular basis for the first eight to ten weeks, until they develop good root systems. Once established, *Dietes* will be drought tolerant. They can be placed in beds with rosemary, red yucca and *Hamelia* or firebush. Spent flower stems can be removed to improve flowering. When planting, space about 2 to 3 feet apart. Several cultivars are available, including "Orange Drops" and "Lemon Drops." Another, close relative from South Africa, *Moraea grandiflora*, will also grow well in south Texas. The *Moraea* looks like a white version of the Louisiana iris. If you would like to learn more about landscaping plants visit on-line at <http://aggie-horticulture.tamu.edu>. Additionally, the Cameron County Master Gardeners will be providing an all day workshop in San Benito on April 24th on Landscaping and Gardening. You can contact Rosalinda at (956) 498-7840 or (956) 455-2096 for more information. For those who attend our Farmer's Market in North San Juan, the next market is on April 3, featuring Chef Zenon Ollis of the Republic of the Rio Grande.

Barbara Storz is an Extension Educator for horticulture with the Texas AgriLife Extension Service, part of Texas A & M University system. She can be reached at (956) 383-1026 or by e-mail at (956) 383-1026.

