

Yellow Flag or European Yellow Iris

Iris pseudacorus

Lily Family (Liliaceae)

Description: Yellow flag is a perennial that grows to a height of 1-3 feet, with grassy or sword-like leaves and showy, lemon-yellow flowers from May to July. The flower has three recurving sepals with broad blades that abruptly contract at the base and three erect, somewhat spoon-shaped petals. Yellow flag's thick pink-fleshed rhizomatous roots form dense mats. Fruits are ovoid and contain several large seeds per capsule. It is the only yellow iris likely to be found growing wild.

Origin: Yellow flag is native to Europe and has long been used in ornamental plantings. The initial escape from cultivation may be by rhizomes washing from low-lying gardens by floods. Subsequent spread is from breaking up of rhizomes or from the abundantly produced seed. Yellow flag is now widely established from Newfoundland to California.

Habitat: Yellow flag prefers moist mineral soils and full sun, but does well in garden conditions. It commonly spreads along river banks, pond edges and in marsh wetlands, but has also invaded the rocky coastal shores of north-eastern Massachusetts.

Why is it a problem? Yellow flag spreads rapidly on shorelines and in wetlands and can out-compete native wetland plants, including two native iris species. It reproduces by rhizome and seed. Floating seeds are carried downstream and create new colonies.

Yellow flag appears to speed up marsh degradation. The rhizome mat prevents germination and seedling growth of other plant species. The mat also creates improved habitat for the iris by compacting soil, elevating the topography and squeezing out water to create drier habitat. Yellow flag reduces wildlife food supplies by out-competing arrow arum (*Peltandra virginica*), an important duck food.

Management: Pulling and hand-digging new plants are good management techniques and preferable to herbicide use in wetland areas. Plants in artificial settings (backyard gardens and water gardens) should be dead-headed after blooming to prevent seedpod development.

Alternatives:

In garden conditions:

Iris innominata, (Golden Iris) from the Pacific Northwest has yellow-gold color.



Illustration by E. Farnsworth

Iris cristata (6 inches) and *Iris verna* (6 to 8 inches) are good for ground covers and rock gardens.

For water gardens and waterside plantings:

Iris versicolor, the native Blue Flag Iris, has showy blue-purple flowers with long-lasting vertical foliage.

Caltha palustris (Marsh Marigold) has yellow blossoms for spring color.

Written by:

Heather Crawford
CT Sea Grant Extension Program
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Reference:

Lindsay Kay Thomas, Jr., 1980. The Impact of Three Exotic Plant Species on a Potomac Island. National Park Service Scientific Monograph Series, #13, (U.S. Department of the Interior) 179 pp.

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