

Fairbanks Daily Newsminer, August 24, 2003

Divide perennials in the fall by Michele Hébert

This week I got a call from a successful local gardener, Mary Parsons. She wanted to give away most of the perennials in her flowerbeds. She said, "The plants have just gotten too big and crowded. I have about 4 pick-up loads full to get rid of." I appreciated her call and had no problem finding new homes for her plants. It reminded me that it was time to get the word out on dividing perennials.

Why divide

There are actually several reasons to divide perennials: to control size, retain vigor and health. The frugal gardener also divides to increase number of plants for their beds and to share with others. As they get older, many perennials start to flop over and open up. Staking can become a serious full time job. Beautiful single stemmed-plants with large flowers develop into multi-stemmed plants. Flowers get smaller as the crowded roots fight for nutrients. Excess foliage encourages more and more diseases. These are all signs that it is time to divide. Some will need to be divided every 3 – 5 years, some every 10 and some not at all. Use the shape and conditions described above to know when your perennials are ready for dividing. If your plants are doing well and you like the way they look, there is no need to divide.

Steps to divide

Cut away the woody and hard stems and any tall foliage. Dig 8 inches all round the base of the plant creating a 16 inches in diameter root ball. The larger the rootball the less damage to roots. Lift the root ball and place the plant on its' side. Gently shake off loose soil and remove dead leaves and stems. Divide the plant into 2 to 4 clumps with your hands, a spade, fork or knife. Each clump or new plant should have 3 to 5 shoots. The center part is usually weak and should be discarded.

Prepare the transplant site to a depth of 12 to 18 inches deep. Add up to 50 percent compost, peat moss or sterilized manure. Mix into each cubic foot of soil 3 tablespoons of 8-32-16. Place 2 tablespoons of triple superphosphate, rock phosphate or bonemeal in the bottom of the hole and cover with 1 inch of dirt. Make a mound to drape the root over. Replant the divided plants at the same depth. Label and water well. Add 3 to 4 inches of mulch around the base after the first hard frost. Brown leaves, hay and composted bark are

good choices for mulch. Straw is not recommended for Alaska. Remove the mulch in spring as soon as growth begins.

It may be necessary to replant divided perennials in containers. There are several reasons for placing perennials in containers including: the new bed may not be ready, you are moving to a new home and want to take plants with you, have friends to share plants with, want to donate to the annual Hospice plant sale in the spring or are thinking about selling at the farmers' market. Special care needs to be taken with containerized plant over the winter because of cold temperature. There are several options. You can put the container in a hole in the ground in the flowerbed and lift it in the spring. Containers can be put in rows in holes and covered to the base of the stem with sawdust. Containers can also be laid on their side and covered with a tarp or leaves to insulate against fluctuating temperature. Putting plants on their sides keeps them from drowning in the spring because of excess water in the pots.

There are so many beautiful perennials that can be grown in Alaska. Perennials can be the backbone of a flowerbed, where annuals are mixed in for interest. They have the advantage of not needing to be planted every year. Perennials are less work. But to keep perennials healthy and looking good dividing is important. If you have any questions contact me at michelesgardenak@hotmail.com