

Propagation of Herbaceous Plants (A Taster).

Definition of a herbaceous plant: A plant that normally dies back or has a resting phase for part of the year. The plant maybe growing from a crown, a modified stem or root (corm, bulb, rhizome or tuber). There will be anomalies such as Hellebores that do not die back but retain their leaves all year round and enter into growth in the autumn. Also there are sub shrubs which will, in general, be cut back by the winter weather and will grow from suckers in the spring and in favourable climates will form a woody structure (Phygelius and Romneya).

Examples:

Crowns: Hosta, Gallardia, Geranium x oxypetalum types, to name a very few.

Rhizomes: Bergenia, Iris (bearded types),

Tubers: Paeonias,

Corms: Crocosmia, Dierama, Gladioli.

Bulbs: Lilies, etc etc.

Root: Primula denticulata, Phlox subulata, Acanthus, Anemone hupehensis, Echinops

Crowns:

The well known method of using two digging forks back to back to tease apart the crown is good to do if the intention is to replant in the garden. If you use this method, ensure that weed roots are taken out. Do not use the centre of the crown if the clump is over 4 years old as it will not be as vigorous and may even be dead. Also ensure that there are no pests in hiding such as vine weevil.

(Vine-weevil can be a problem especially with hardy primulas).

If the intention is to get as many young plants as possible then do the following:

- Divide the clump as above.
- Half fill a large container with water.
- Take a portion of split clump and agitate it in the water, washing off the soil and exposing the root system and dormant buds. The clump will then split down into smaller parts and it's up to you how far you want to go. Doing this also exposes weed roots, dead bits of plant and any pests that the crown maybe harbouring.

- Pot the divisions up in a suitable compost in the smallest pot you can get away with. The intention is to keep the young plant in the pot until mid to late May when the roots will have grown enough to fill the pot and the plant can be put into a nursery border or where you want it to grow. This method is also an excellent way of raising plants for a plant sale or exchange as the maximum potential is obtained from the plant with the minimum of cost.

Rhizomes:

Treat in the same way as the crown, but the rhizome can be separated into clumps for planting in the garden or cut up into smaller sections for bulking up or plant sale as long as there are dormant buds on the rhizome..

Corms:

Using *Crocsmia* as an example, you will see the youngest corm at the top with older corms stacked up below. When splitting or propagating do not get rid of all the old corms. There is food value in them which will help establish the young plant quicker. As a rule of thumb try to retain 3 generations of corm in the splitting process.

Tubers:

Split carefully and ensure that there is at least one viable bud on the tuber. When dealing with expensive tubers such as *Paeonias*, the washing procedure is very helpful in allowing a good split and helping to get rid of pests especially slugs and slug eggs.

Bulbs:

Most bulbs will produce offsets which occur at the basal plate of the bulb. Simply break the offset off and either plant out in a nursery bed or pot up in suitable compost (not bulb fibre) and allow to grow on feeding with a weak liquid foliar feed after about 6 weeks of growth. If the offset sends a flower shoot up take it off as flowering takes energy away from the bulb.

There other methods such as Twin Scaling , this requires more specialist handling and some warmth and is not covered in this introductory session.

Root Cuttings:

Root cuttings can be taken throughout the plant's dormant period and the requirements for a successful cutting are as follows:

- A healthy root, at least the thickness of a pencil.
- Knowing which is the top and the bottom of the cutting. Though this is not as critical if using a seed tray (see below).

- Root cuttings can be taken whilst the parent plant is still in the ground by carefully exposing a section of the plant's root system. Suitable roots can then be selected and cut off the parent.
- When the root has been removed, clean it off in water and starting at the top, make a slanting cut.
- Measure down at least 20cm and make a straight cut at the bottom of the cutting. Carry on with a slanting cut then a straight cut until the root is too thin to be viable.
- The whole plant can be lifted with roots washed and cuttings taken. The parent plant can then be potted up or replanted depending on how much of the root system has been used for cutting material.
- Pot into a suitable container with 50% grit/sharp sand & 50% general purpose compost (with the slant cut at the top and straight cut at the bottom and cover the cuttings over, up to 1cm deep).
- Label and water.
- Put the pot into a cool greenhouse or north facing windowsill and wait.
- When young shoots appear, carefully remove the cuttings and pot up as normal. Label and water and keep protected until the plant is established.

Another method is to

- half fill a seed tray with 50/50 compost and lay the cuttings horizontally. Cover with more compost to the top of the tray and gently firm. Label and water and give the same aftercare. This method may produce more shoots. Depending on how many plants are required, the rooted cutting can be cut at each new shoot and potted up.
- Greater aftercare will be needed ie longer in the pot and more heat to bring the plants on.

Seed:

Growing herbaceous plants and some shrubs from seed is a cheap way of propagating plants that do not readily split but can sometimes be very slow. Prime examples of the slow to germinate are Tree Peonias, particularly *lutea*, *delavayii* and *villosa* types, also *Daphne mezereum* and *Hellebores*, Lilies and other bulbous plants.

Conversely seed can be a fast way of getting a good collection of plants reasonably cheaply. There are a number of specialist seed houses such as Plant World Seeds, Jellito or Chiltern Seeds. It is worth searching the internet where bargains can be had. The mainstream seed companies, Thomson & Morgan, Dobies, Suttons etc also have a reasonable selection of herbaceous seed. Most specialist societies for example the Hardy Plant Society, Scottish Rock Garden Club, Alpine Garden Society and Delphinium Society, have seed lists for members, where mainstream and some esoteric plant seeds can be sourced.

Seed is sown as soon as it is received and given the protection of a cold frame or greenhouse or the north facing windowsill. If seed is sown fresh it will usually germinate more readily. Some seed, if kept, will go into a dormant phase and may take over 12 months to germinate. Cold treatment (Vernalisation) maybe required. Some seed takes over 12 months to show a shoot so be prepared to hang on to pots sown the previous year. Peonias are a prime example where the first year is spent developing a root and the second year sending up a shoot.

Do not be tempted to prick out and pot on slow germinating plants eg. Lilies. Most bulbous plants from seed need to form a viable bulb, which will take 2 to 3 years, before they can be singled out and planted. Feed with a weak liquid foliar feed and if new compost is required then carefully knock out the whole pot and pot into a slightly bigger container with the minimum of disturbance.

Propagating plants is a fascinating and cheap way of increasing your plant collection and spreading plants about. All of a sudden you start to receive as well as give which is what gardening is ALL about.