

PROPAGATING PERENNIALS

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After the South Pennine Group visited my nursery last year to see me demonstrate propagation techniques, some members suggested it would be a good idea to write the information down...so here it is.

Most of my propagation is done by division and cuttings. The timing is not critical and can be adapted by a month or two, depending on the weather and how busy you are. I only have a small back garden nursery, but in the past I have produced up to 6,000 plants per year, including around 2,000 euphorbias. It sounds a lot, but it isn't when compared to a professional nurseryman's output.

Division

My new year for propagation begins in mid-October when I start to divide early spring flowering perennials, including pulmonaria, geum, primula, epimedium, aquilegia, astrantia, brunnera, doronicum, veronica, corydalis, and *Valeriana phu*, as well as many deciduous types of euphorbia. These can also be divided in early spring, but I have found from experience that, if divided in spring, the plant's energy goes into flower production and root development is slow, whereas divisions taken in autumn put down roots first and produce a saleable plant sooner (I will not sell a plant unless there is evidence of new roots in the pot).

Incidentally, I always use a slow-release fertiliser in my potting compost, which usually lasts a good six months. Plants that have not been sold by August will be potted on to an 11cm pot or top-dressed with slow-release fertiliser, which will see them through to the end of the year.

All late spring and summer flowering perennials are divided in the New Year. There is a long list here, but major plant groups I divide include iris, tradescantia, achillea, hemerocallis, monarda, helenium, phlox, sedum, aster, and varieties of *Anemone japonica*. Crocosmia can also be divided at this time; one corm per pot will produce a viable plant, but I tend to plant clusters of corms in each pot. This results in a larger flowering plant. I start in January, whenever the weather allows plants to be dug out of the ground, but the peak months for making divisions are February and March. The only plants I divide in April are hostas. Yes, I know that hostas can be divided in the autumn, but I never have, probably because they are not a priority at that time. New top growth can be seen on hostas in April, and as long as you cut one growing tip with a piece of root attached, it will make a new plant.

It isn't necessary to dig up a whole plant to take divisions, especially if you have a large clump. Just dig out a portion and fill the resultant hole with some good topsoil; by summer, no-one would ever know. Some plants, like hostas, day lilies, epimediums and *Iris sibirica* are tough and need a large, strong, sharp knife to divide them. If you have ever tried to divide some of the woody-rooted forms of euphorbia, such as *E. palustris*, you'll know you need a hammer and chisel, combined with a weightlifter's aggression and strength! Other genera, such as pulmonaria, primula, monarda, dicentra, corydalis and achillea, for example, can simply be pulled apart.

Overwintering divided plants is simply a case of standing the pots outside or in an unheated greenhouse, no heat required. Pots often become frozen solid on frosty days and nights.

Cuttings

Non-flowering tip cuttings may be taken from a wide variety of perennials and shrubs during the growing season. Most of my cuttings are taken between the end of May and August. We all have our own recipe for cuttings compost, but I have settled on a 50/50 mix of multi-purpose compost and perlite. This is free-draining but doesn't dry out too quickly. In my experience, rooting powder accelerates the production of new roots. Generally, I do not cover cuttings or use heat, but I do keep them in the shade. If you 'Chelsea chop' certain perennials, you will have plenty of free cutting material in late May and early June; sedums are dead easy to propagate this way.

However, I find it more successful to propagate helenium, phlox and aster by taking basal cuttings from new growth emerging at ground level in early summer.

I usually pot up rooted cuttings of perennials and types of euphorbia in the autumn. You can pot rooted cuttings into 9cm pots at this time but, as I'm always short of room, I normally pot these cuttings into 7cm pots. This saves space in the greenhouse. Limited watering will keep the plants alive through the winter, until they show signs of growth in the spring, at which point I will pot them on.

The key to getting cuttings through their first winter is to water sparingly, especially euphorbia cuttings which hate high humidity; too much moisture can soon attract fungal diseases which will cause the cuttings to rot. Ventilating the greenhouse during the daytime on milder days can help prevent the spores from getting a hold. My cuttings greenhouse receives background heat only if the temperature dips below -3°C ; in the warmer winter of 2015/16, the heater was not switched on at all.



Taking cuttings using rooting powder

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