

AUTUMN PREPARATIONS FOR SPRING PLANT SALES

Autumn may be the best time to edit the arrangement and composition of a perennial garden because it is easier then to tell what has worked design-wise during the growing season (and what hasn't) and what has outgrown its assigned place. By the time spring rolls around it is hard to remember what was overtaking what the previous year. Not only that, but the editing can be carried out at a much more leisurely pace because one doesn't have to wait for the ground to thaw out.

The beneficiary of autumn editing can be springtime plant sales. Rather than composting excess perennials they can be potted up, labeled, and set aside until spring.

I have had very good success with fall potting of perennials. One of the important things to do is to never let them dry out before potting or while they are in their pots. I don't use any pots smaller than one gallon. I like to use compost as the potting soil. Commercial potting mix can be mixed with the compost, garden soil or by itself. Use what is most available or affordable. If using garden soil make sure that it is not from an area where slugs have been found. It is not a good idea to pass them along to prospective buyers.

Labels should be added to each pot immediately!! Some plants have identical foliage but different flower colors (New England asters, for instance) and if I haven't labeled them accordingly I promptly forget which is which. Labels need only the briefest info at this time—species, variety name (if known), and flower color. A more complete label can be added in the spring if needed. Labels can be made from cut up venetian blinds and written on with #2 pencil. The pencil marks are more weather resistant than Sharpies. Best of all are nursery-grade markers such as 'Garden Marker.'

When they are first potted I keep them in light shade. As they settle into their new home they can be moved to a sunnier spot if that is where you want to keep them for the winter. I put the pots on top of the ground, or sunk up to their rims in a vegetable bed, in a sunny spot. Hostas and other shade lovers can stay in the shade if it is more convenient for you. Pack the pots closely to each other.

As really cold weather approaches I put mouse/vole bait scattered on the ground here and there between the pots. Then I cover them up with a blanket of straw or leaves surrounded with a corral of chicken wire to keep the blanket from blowing away. The posts that hold up the chicken wire have to be pushed into the dirt before the ground freezes, but the straw/leaf blanket should not be applied before it gets really cold so that it doesn't get moldy underneath.

In the spring as things start to warm up the blanket needs to be removed to prevent mold. Then as soon as the pots start to thaw out they need to be moved so that they more rapidly thaw out all the way to the bottom. They need to be kept in a sunny place so that growth is encouraged.

There are usually a few plants that don't make it, but the vast majority do and the plants look much better than the ones that I pot up in the spring.

Since I am potting up plants now that are still green I break off the seedheads but leave many leaves so that the plants devote their energies to forming roots rather than ripening seeds. They look quite wretched when I do this, but I don't care what they look like now. Tall stems can then be removed after they have died off for the winter or they can be removed in the spring. I usually leave them to catch snow that adds to the blanket.

When it comes to lilies I wait until the foliage has died back before I dig them up. When I separate the bulbs then each bulb can be planted deeply in a pot, just as it would be planted deeply in the garden. Just make sure that there is about 1 1/2 inch of soil under it in the pot.

Happy Gardening,
Jennifer Porwit