

Post Rock Answers

By Cassie Homan August 27, 2021

Post Rock Extension District Horticulture Agent

Dividing Perennial Plants

Fall is the perfect time to get some garden chores done. A few perennials can be divided now before cold weather sets in. Daylilies and irises need to be divided about every 3-5 years to maintain vigor and flowering ability. Diving them in fall allows their roots to become established so they can take off quickly in spring.

Daylilies are common plants in our landscapes and luckily don't take much maintenance. Though they may be divided in early spring before growth starts, it is more common to divide them at this time of year. Many gardeners cut back the tops to about half their original height to make plants easier to handle while dividing.

Daylilies have a very tough root system that can make them difficult to divide while in place. Dividing in place can be done if it hasn't been long since the last division. In such cases, a spading fork can be used to peel fans from the existing clump. If the plants have been in place longer and are well grown together, it is more practical to divide them after the entire clump has been dug. Use a spade to lift the entire clump out of the ground. Although it is possible to cut the clump apart with a sharp spade, you'll save more roots by using two spading forks back-to-back to divide the clump into sections. Each section should be about the size of a head of cauliflower. An easier method involves using a stream of water from a garden hose to wash the soil from the clump, and then rolling the clump back and forth until the individual divisions separate.

Once you have the plants separated, space divisions 24 to 30 inches apart, and set each at its original depth. The number of flowers will be reduced the first year after division but will return to normal until the plants need to be divided again.

Bearded irises are well adapted to Kansas and multiply quickly. After several years, the centers of the clumps tend to lose vigor, and flowering occurs toward the outside. Dividing iris every three to five years will help rejuvenate the planting and increase flowering.

Because iris clumps are fairly shallow, it is easy to dig up the entire clump. The root system of the plant consists of thick rhizomes and smaller feeder roots. Use a sharp knife to cut the rhizomes apart so each division consists of a fan of leaves and a section of rhizome. The best divisions are made from a double fan that consists of two small rhizomes attached to a larger one, which forms a Y-shaped division. Each of these small rhizomes has a fan of leaves. The rhizomes that do not split produce single fans. The double fans are preferred because they produce more flowers the first year after planting. Single fans take a year to build up strength.

K-State Research and Extension has a variety of resources for all your gardening and landscaping needs this fall. Stop by or give us a call with your questions.

Post Rock Extension District of K-State Research and Extension serves Jewell, Lincoln, Mitchell, Osborne, and Smith counties. Cassie may be contacted at choman@ksu.edu or by calling Beloit (785-738-3597).