

Attending to Perennials

Distribute 11-02-2017

Blooming perennials are providing color for many landscapes at this time. Mexican flame vine, lantanas, Mexican bush sage, fall aster, and mint marigold are among the most obvious. Other perennials are taking a break this fall in preparation for their blooming period in the spring.

It is a good time to give spring blooming perennials some attention. A group of plants described as “weak perennials” includes Shasta daisy, verbena, German carnations, and phlox. They aren’t entirely comfortable with our alkaline, heavy soils and hot dry weather. If left to themselves, they will often weaken and decline from the center out. Gardeners have found that if the clumps are dug up and divided every 3 to 4 years it can stimulate a renewed vigor. Use a sharp spade to divide the root clump into 2 to 4 parts. The renewal works especially well if the soil in the bed is enriched with 2 to 3 inches of compost and one cup of slow release lawn fertilizer for every 10-sq. ft. of bed. Replant the divided clumps 2 feet apart in the old or new beds.

Gardeners certainly do not think of iris as weak perennials but the drought -tolerant deer-proof plants also benefit by some attention now. They can become so thick in the bed that the bloom performance declines. Dig up the clump of iris and break up the rhizomes. You will find it is easy to find natural splitting points in the clump. Discard any partially rotted or insect ravaged rhizomes and then plant the newly divided pieces 18 inches apart in the bed.

For best results iris should be grown in full sun. Iris are long lived. It often occurs that iris were planted in a bed when it was in full sun and then after several decades the trees have grown over the area to make it too shady for good iris blooms.

Iris are not fussy about soil as long as it is not soggy. Plant them so that the top of the rhizome is at the same level as the soil surface. Iris are one of the few well adapted plants for our area that do best without mulch. Spread a cup of slow-release or winterizer or slow release lawn fertilizer over every 10-sq. feet of the replanted and new beds.

If you have extra iris put them in a paper sack until you can find another gardener that has a place to plant them. They will store best in a temperature controlled(air-conditioned) room but will last 6 months or more even in a shed.

Daylilies that have become crowded can also be divided now. Like the iris rhizomes it is easy to find natural divisions in the in the daylily bulb mass. Plant daylilies 3 to 4 inches deep with spacing 12-24 inches apart, depending on the size of the variety.

Use both iris and daylilies for their blooms and as a groundcover. The upright sword-like blades of iris and the more succulent weeping foliage of daylilies contrast with and compliment the usual broadleaf groundcovers. Daylilies bloom in early summer after the iris. Like iris they are

good xeriscape plants, but they are fussier about soil. Daylilies bloom best in full sun in well-drained soil. A raised bed situation is usually ideal. Deer relish daylily foliage and blooms so that is a limitation to their use.