

# September 2016 Newsletter

"They know, they just know where to grow, how to dupe you, and how to camouflage themselves among the perfectly respectable plants, they just know, and therefore, I've concluded weeds must have brains."  
- Dianne Benson, *Dirt*, 1994



## From the President's Pen

I can't believe summer has come and gone. We certainly had a challenge this year with lack of rain and extremely hot temperatures. We also had two lovely summer visits at Richard Catchpaw's garden on July 19th and at Noreen Tyers on August 9th. We really appreciate all the work which both of them went through in order to give our members two very distinct and beautiful gardening experiences. Thank you so much to both of them for their hard work and kindness.

Perth hosted the Flower and Edible show on August 6 at the Perth Legion. Due to the efforts of Madeline Archer, a seasoned show co-ordinator, a team was put together "to make it happen". This is a very important year for Perth, Ontario as we celebrate the 200th Anniversary of Perth as a Settlement.

The Town Crier, Brent McLaren very skillfully announced his Worship the Mayor of Perth, John Fenik, who opened the show. The Mayor even made a comment about the quality of the exhibits. Our program was full with the show opening at 1:00 p.m. and our tea room available for patrons to purchase delicious squares and cookies along with liquid refreshments.

The mood was extremely upbeat; so many comments were that of awestruck observers who remarked on the quality of the exhibits. The show was well attended with a number of people staying to see the flower arranging competition and the demonstrations of floral arrangements brought admiration and excitement from the audience. You can read further on our show in the Fall edition of the Trillium located at <http://www.gardenontario.org>. My deepest appreciation to all our sponsors, numerous volunteers who donated baked goods, worked at the flower show and those unsung heroes who worked in the kitchen washing dish after dish.

Now on a personal note, I will not be running for President for a third year, so I am appealing to our members to nominate someone or even yourselves to run on the Executive for 2017. There will be four vacancies on the board so please think about taking on this commitment. Nominations can be accepted anytime right up to the AGM in November 2016. I have loved my tenure as your President but I think it's time to step down and let someone else try their hand at it.

Let's embrace Fall!

Jane Law



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Lanark Orchid

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Perth & District  
Horticultural  
Society

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Perth, ON, K7H 3G1  
[www.gardenontario.org](http://www.gardenontario.org)

District #2 of the  
Ontario Horticultural  
Association

## Upcoming Meetings

On **October 11** the planned topic for the Hort society meeting is "What is Happening to Our Pollinators?" by Dr. James Coupland.

**November 22** is the Potluck and AGM with a guest speaker, Elizabeth Otonicar, demonstrating "Decorating with Nature."

## PDHS October Flower Show

### Section I: Horticultural Specimen

- Class 1 Last rose of summer – single bloom
- Class 2 Any perennial – 3 stems
- Class 3 Any annual – 3 stems
- Class 4 A collection of gourds – minimum 3
- Class 5 Squash – 2 – same or 2 different cultivars – named if possible
- Class 6 Pumpkin – 1

### Section II: Design

- Class 7 Fence Line – a design incorporating decorative wood/driftwood
- Class 8 Pik'n Plunk – Harvest Festival – an arrangement using fall colours

## Dividing Peonies

By Larry Hodgson, Laidback Gardener  
<https://laidbackgardener.wordpress.com>

Yes, fall is the right season for dividing herbaceous peonies (*Paeonia lactiflora* and others), but I have to stress right from the start there is no obligation here: peonies don't need division. They can easily live for 100 years or more in the same spot and will only become more beautiful with time. Nor do they appreciate gardeners fiddling with their roots. In fact, they hate it and will take years to fully recover from the shock. So if your peonies are doing fine and you have no pressing need to move them, just leave them alone.

That said, if you want to propagate a herbaceous peony, division is pretty much your only choice. Yes, you can also multiple them by tissue culture, but that method really isn't within easy reach of the home gardener. And peonies grown from seed will not be true to type and will take years to bloom. So if you want more peonies without having to pay for new plants, you have little choice but to divide them.

## Divide and Transplant

Peonies dislike transplanting even more than division. If you dig up a mature clump and simply move it, it can take years to start to bloom again, if indeed it ever does. So again, my best advice is if you don't absolutely have to move a peony, you'd do best to leave it alone.

Of course, there are all sorts of legitimate reasons why you really do have to transplant a peony: the conditions at the site have deteriorated (notably, full sun has become deep shade as nearby trees grow), the garden is being redone for whatever reason, you're moving and want to take a Grandma's old peony with you, etc. If so, don't just transplant, divide. Dividing is ultimately less of a shock than transplanting and has the effect of rejuvenating the plant, allowing it to grow back gradually and soon reach its former glory.

### How to Divide a Peony

By the end of August and into September and October, your peonies are either dormant or close to being dormant and won't suffer as much trauma when you dig into their roots. Their leaves haven't put on any growth in months and will soon be losing their green coloration and turning sometimes lovely shades of purple, yellow, red, and orange (although some varieties go straight to brown), if indeed they already haven't started. A change in leaf color is a sign their growth is over for the year.

Start by cutting the leaves back to about 6 inches (15 cm) from the ground so you can better see what you're doing. Leaving the leaf stalks short but in place isn't absolutely necessary and some gardeners cut them right to the ground, but they can make great handles for handling the plant.

Unlike many perennials you can divide by just digging out a chunk from the outside of the clump to move elsewhere, thus causing minimal disturbance to the mother plant, when you divide peonies, it's wisest to dig the whole thing up. You'll find the clump is huge and heavy, with long carrot-shaped roots reaching irregularly out in all directions. You'll inevitably have to slice off the tips of some of the longer roots, but do try to keep as much root length as possible. You'll have to dig all around the rootball and try to lever it free, cutting underneath as well. That's a lot of work and you might want to bring in someone to help. Now rinse thoroughly with water to remove the soil, otherwise you won't be able to see what you're doing.

Move the clump to a spot where you can give it a thorough look-over. You'll notice that what appeared to be a solid rootball as actually composed of several growing points, each with several roots, attached to each other by a bit of underground stem. Your goal will be to figure out the best places to cut. Try where possible to divide between sections that are clearly separate. Unless you want to produce a large number of plants and don't care if they don't bloom for several years, don't divide the plant into small fragments with only one or two eyes (buds). Prefer divisions with three to five eyes. They'll recover and start to rebloom much more quickly. Slice between sections with a sterilized knife (dip it in rubbing alcohol between each cut). Remove and compost any dead roots.

You can plant the divisions right away or wait a week or two. The plant, being essentially dormant, won't suffer from a relatively short exposure to air. In fact, I suggest letting the roots dry out at least for a few hours, until they soften up a bit. That way they'll be less brittle and likely to break when you manipulate them.

#### **Where to Plant**

Choose a location with rich well-drained soil (even clay will do as long as the drainage is good), if possible in full sun. Partial shade is acceptable, although that will reduce future bloom somewhat. Avoid spots dominated by tree roots. Whatever spot you choose, plan ahead. Peonies are permanent plants and should be placed where you won't have to disturb them for the next 40 years! Now plant the divisions, digging a hole to a depth and width appropriate to the size of the division. It is important to ensure that the eyes are not buried more than 2 inches (5 cm) deep, otherwise the plant will struggle to bloom. Planting too deep can leave the plant "blind", that is to say it will produce only leaves and no flowers. Now, fill the hole with soil (you can amend it with compost or fertilizer if you prefer, but if the soil is naturally of good quality, that won't be necessary), tamp lightly, mulch and water well. And there you go: it's no more complicated than that.

#### **Slow But Steady**

In general, freshly planted divisions sometimes flower lightly the following spring, sometimes not, but certainly should the second year. After 4 or 5 years, your peony will have pretty much recovered and should flower quite abundantly, although it will still take it another 4 to 5 years

for it to reach its maximum bloom.

So, gardeners, off to your shovels: you've got a bit of dividing to do!

## **The After-Effects Of Drought**

*Dr. Leonard Perry, Horticulture Professor Emeritus  
University of Vermont*

Many parts of the Northeast experienced a drier than usual summer this year. This affected many perennials, trees, and shrubs. What can you expect now, and in the coming year, as a result? What can you do to help these stressed plants?

If you have very dry sites, like sandy soil and medians near pavement, or new plantings, you already may have lost some plants. There's not much you can do here except replant and help plants get established in future years. Using organic mulches is a good way to retain soil moisture for the future.

Don't be too hasty to replace plants that appear to have dried up. Plants that appear to be dead may actually have living tissue underneath the bark, or in the ground. Scratch the bark of trees or shrubs to see if it is still green underneath. It's best to wait, if you can, until next spring and see if these plants leaf out. The same applies to woody plants that are living but may appear to have "dead" branches. Again, use the fingernail test to see if these still have some life. If so, wait until spring to prune.

For perennials, prune off obviously dead growth and branches. If the whole plant appears to be dead, mark it to remember its location, as it may produce new shoots next spring. Browning on the leaves may not be aesthetically pleasing, but leave them as they are still helping the plant. Keep perennials weeded, as weeds rob them of soil moisture. "Deadhead," or remove, spent flowers from perennials so the plants will conserve energy from not forming seeds.

Whether you have a sandy or heavier clay soil, top dressing with compost will help. Generally, the more compost the better. Organic matter is key to soil health and helping soils to retain more moisture. This also will help lawns that may have suffered or died during a drought.

Speaking of lawns, you may wish to rent an aerator or get some aerator blades for a mini-tiller to help heavy, baked soils. For weak or stressed lawns on clay, as well as on lighter sandy soils, you might want to lightly overseed

grasses in early fall prior to topdressing lightly with compost. If seeding, make sure you can keep lawns watered until the new seeds germinate and begin to establish. Maybe it's time to consider whether some of your lawn can be replaced with easier-to-maintain groundcovers.

Keep all plants watered as well as possible. This means a good soaking. Light watering fosters shallow roots, which are quite susceptible to drought. If you have only a few perennials or shrubs, watering by hand or a slow trickle from the hose may work. If you can't water all your landscape if it has been stressed from drought, focus on new plantings, and on trees and shrubs. Annuals and perennials are more easily replaced if they succumb to drought.

For a whole perennial bed, soaker hoses often are the best method of delivery. These are porous rubber hoses that allow water to soak right into the root area and not on foliage. These don't foster leaf diseases, and they don't waste water to evaporation and areas without plants, as do overhead sprinklers. If using overhead sprinklers, water early in the day to allow foliage to dry before night.

From late September into October, it is especially important to keep rhododendrons and other evergreens well watered. This will help them get through winter with a minimum browning of leaves. If they've been stressed from too little water during summer, this fall watering is even more important.

The usual rule-of-thumb for watering is an inch of water per week, if not from rain then from your efforts. Get a rain gauge if you don't have one so you're not fooled. What may appear to be a rainy period, in reality may not end up delivering sufficient rain. Keep in mind that when looking at climate numbers, it is the amount and frequency of rain during a growing season that is important, not the yearly total (which may have come in just one or a few events).

Don't fertilize woody plants in early fall as this may promote non-hardy growth, and in late fall it does little good since plants have gone dormant. However, many herbaceous perennials will respond to fall fertilizer (an organic, slow release form works well) by going into the winter hardier and with more food reserves for the following year.

Just keep in mind, too, that what happens

one year with woody plants, such as this year's drought stress, often shows up the following year or even for several years after. You may see plants with less vigour, increasing dieback such as from winter injury, or more susceptibility to diseases and pests. Deciduous trees (those that lose their leaves over winter) which turn color in fall, such as maples, may turn color much sooner if drought stressed. It may take several years of proper care and moisture for plants to fully recover from a very dry summer.

Many woody and herbaceous perennials that bloom early in the season set their buds the previous year. These include lilacs, forsythia, peonies, and many daylilies. Even the later bloomers may have less growth next year as a result of the stresses this year. So, keep an eye on these and, if they are not at their best this coming year, don't despair but have patience!

If, in any given year, your plants don't bloom or perform well, ask yourself what happened last year. Were there stresses? Or, did the plants bloom quite well and now are taking a year to recoup? Some fruit trees do this naturally and regularly, a natural process termed "alternate bearing." Understanding what happened the year before will help you provide proper care – and extra help if needed – for your plants this year.

## Go Gloveless

We all enjoy working in the soil. Here's why, in part, according to a recent newspaper article.

Soil contains a bacteria called Mycobacterium vaccae that chemically works on your brain. It activates serotonin like anti-depressants are supposed to do.

So there you go – get your hands dirty (forget the gloves, small cuts on the hands are useful here) and you'll feel better in a couple of ways.

For more detailed information, check out the following link: <http://edmontonjournal.com/life/homes/garden-soil-for-the-soul-how-gardening-can-enhance-mood-brain-function>

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*Go for a Boston Fern instead of an air purifier in the house. One Boston Fern can remove 1,863 micrograms of formaldehyde from the air in your house in one hour.*