



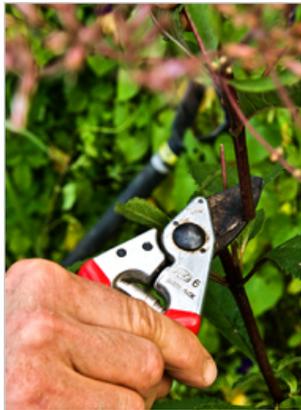
IN THE GARDEN

Time to Move Perennials and Herbs

By ANNE RAVER Published: August 20, 2008

LATE August is when most people look at their weedy vegetable patches and their beetle-infested roses and the poison ivy climbing through the smoke bushes, and throw in the trowel. That joyful, anything-is-possible spring vision has succumbed to the reality of too much rain for the tomatoes, too much shade for the roses, not enough room for the monster shrubs.

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Matt Roth for The New York Times

MOVING DAY Late August is ideal for moving a perennial, like joe-pye weed. Before digging it up, prune blossoms and a third of the stem.

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Matt Roth for The New York Times

LOVIN' SPOONFUL Mix rock powder, like Azomite, into the new hole to release nutrients and promote root growth.

But it's the perfect time for moving perennials and herbs. I'll wait until frost, or mid-October, to move the roses, shrubs and trees, because until they lose their leaves, these plants will be too stressed if their roots are disturbed.

Moving any plant inevitably means severing some roots, making the remaining roots much less able to support the leaves and late-blooming flowers above. It's easy to cut back perennials and herbs, removing their blooms and some of their leaves. But pruning a woody plant encourages new growth — a no-no when plants are heading for dormancy, because young shoots may not have time to harden off before a deep freeze. Later in the fall, though, they may be moved without such heavy demands on roots, which can flourish in cool soil and become established long before spring.

I have three monster shrubs in my little walled rose garden: two purple ninebarks and a shrub magnolia, muscling out the nepeta, the alpine strawberries, the caryopteris, the baptisia, the Siberian irises, the alliums. They were cute little two-footers when I planted them years ago. So was the cucumber magnolia I plunked on the bank, overlooking the garden. Now they are all heading past six feet and are just as wide, perfect plants in the wrong place.

When it comes time, later this fall or in the early spring, I'm not sure if my boyfriend, Rock, and I will be able to move these monsters without hurting our backs. We might have to call Jimmy Pickett, our tree man, who would be glad to move them with his crew for a few hundred dollars a pop. However we move them, we will make their move easier by

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Matt Roth for The New York Times

WIGGLE ROOM Just before laying the plant into its new home, add a handful of worm castings, rich with micro-nutrients.

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Matt Roth for The New York Times

SEAL THE DEAL After setting the roots, replacing the soil and watering well, press down firmly on the soil to remove any air pockets.

root pruning now — taking a sharp spade and cutting around the drip line in a circle, to sever the roots. The cuts encourage feeder roots to grow, which will help sustain the shrubs when they are moved.

On the other hand, I could just get out my trusty Japanese pruning saw and fell these giants right now. But it's hard for me to kill beautiful plants that I have nursed along from babyhood. And Rock and I are lucky to have room for them, in an old chicken yard that has evolved into a bird habitat, full of viburnums, hydrangeas, pussy willows and old roses.

So last week I shelved that question and concentrated on moving the easy things — catmint, lavender, a young vitex and joe-pye weed — into our barnyard garden, where we recently improved the soil with a truckload of compost and topsoil.

One of the first rules of moving a plant is to make sure that the surrounding soil is damp and crumbly, not bone dry, or the roots will be more apt to tear. I had that problem with some tall ironweed I bought on a whim and parked temporarily in the tomato patch. Once the tomatoes started turning red, I cut back on the water to intensify their flavor. The ironweed, a prairie plant, didn't seem to mind at all. But when I decided to dig it out without getting the soil nice and damp first, I ripped off the ends of some of its roots. It's recovering well, though, with a good dose of seaweed solution, ruthless pruning and regular watering. (It's not called ironweed for nothing.)

When digging a perennial, I use a sharp spade, rather than a curved shovel, and insert it a few inches from the edge of the plant, shoving it in as far as it will go. A foot is ideal. I work in a circle around the entire plant. Then I pry it up from all sides. If it doesn't come out easily, I reach under it with my hands, searching for the root that won't let go, and snip it off with my clippers. Then I lift the plant, set it in my wheelbarrow, cover the exposed roots with soil and cart it over to its new hole.

It's a good idea to dig the hole first, to minimize the roots' exposure to air and light. The hole should be at least twice the width of the perennial or shrub, but only as deep as the plant was growing underground. If you have poor or compacted soil, amend an entire bed with organic matter, rather than just the hole, because roots will stop growing once they hit the wall of compacted soil. Homogeneous soil will help water drain consistently, rather than stopping when it hits the wall of clay.

I mix a bit of rock powder into the base of each hole to help release nutrients from the soil and encourage root growth. I also work in a handful of worm castings (from my redworm composting box), which are teeming with nutrients and micro-organisms. I lay the roots in the hole, gently replacing the soil around them and watering well with a diluted seaweed solution, which seems to reduce transplant shock. Then I press down firmly on the soil, to remove any air pockets. I follow the same basic procedure later in the fall for small shrubs like caryopteris, asters and peonies.

There are two tree peonies I would like to move now, although ideally I should wait until next fall, after root-pruning them in the spring after they have bloomed. But they are being smothered by overgrown shrubs — a viburnum and a pussy willow — so a few days ago, I went ahead and root-pruned them, and I plan to move them in October, when they go

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dormant.

David Furman, the owner of Cricket Hill Garden, in Thomaston, Conn., who sold me these beauties years ago, advised me on how to move them, in a recent e-mail message. Trim off the leaves at the time of frost, he wrote, and carefully excavate the roots, working in a circle around the plant. Generally, the roots go down as deep as the plant is tall.

Depending on the species, tree peonies have fibrous or fleshy tap roots. The latter are more vulnerable to injury, so it's important to dig a generous hole, at least two feet wide and deep. Allow about five feet of space between the plants.

As with all plants, move peonies as quickly as possible, water well and mulch with a few inches of compost to help keep the soil moist.

But what about those beautiful monsters? Mr. Pickett is coming this weekend to give us an estimate on the magnolias — valuable plants, really, though I got them for free. But a friend suggested that we move the ninebarks ourselves, bareroot, which means gently removing most of the soil, thereby lightening the load considerably.

“They’re weeds,” he said. “Move them any time. They’ll be fine.”

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