**Talk by Roger Hirons “The Plant Doctor” Thursday 14th September 2017**

**“Perennials for Everyone!”**

*A sheet entitled ‘Plant Longevity’ was handed out to those who attended the meeting to help with the presentation.*

Roger began his talk by explaining that Herbaceous perennials are divisible by root. During its dormant period the plant can be dug up and the root divided into sections. The original plant can be replanted and the plantlets potted up and planted out when new growth has formed.

Prior to the introduction of plastic flower pots in 1969, nurseries would sell the plantlets bare-rooted from plants they grew in fields.

There are over 2000 varieties of herbaceous perennials.

Roger buys all his plants from the north of England to ensure that they are hardy enough to thrive in even the coldest parts of the south of England.

It is possible to buy one well developed plant and divide it to make a group of three. Grasses and Phormiums can be divided this way. Grow on small plants for a season then replant or give away.

Don’t let fast growers, like the common variety of a species (identifiable by the name Vulgaris), take over your garden. Divide them and keep them under control.

Dividing the plants can prolong their life. Replant with fresh soil, ideally in a different part of the garden. All plants of the same family will take the same nutrients out of the soil, so check the plant’s family name, e.g. Rosac**eae** for the Rose family, before replanting something of the same family.

When creating a bed for herbaceous perennials don’t edge the bed with box plants. This is because box hates having its roots disturbed, making it very difficult to dig up perennials to divide them without spoiling the box plants. Yew is a much better option. Remember when you are trimming a hedge always shape it tapering to the top so that the water will run off it into the soil at the base.

When you have a plant you want to divide, mark its position with a cane so that you know where it is after its leaves have come off because the plant will virtually disappear.

Nature’s way is to leave the overwintering plants covered with leaves and debris to protect the plants from the winter cold. Don’t be too concerned about having a tidy winter garden. You will lose more beneficial bugs than bad ones.

In the next section of the talk Roger showed examples of interesting perennials to grow along with photographs of them in flower as follows:

**Echinacea** -Leave the seed heads on over winter and Goldfinches will feed on the seeds.

**Rudbekeia Laciniana – Gold Quelle** – This is a late flowering variety. It grows tall so will need staking while it’s young. Roger suggested the hoop stakes or hardwood rose stakes in a circle secured with wire. Once it has formed a clump it will support itself.

**Dicentra – Bountiful** – Spring interest, it needs dappled shade. It is no good in heavy, waterlogged soil. It dies down to the soil over winter.

If your soil is poor and prone to waterlogging, build up a mound of topsoil to plant into so that the heavy soil becomes the sub-soil. With Sedum and other succulents it is sometimes a good idea to plant on a slope to improve drainage. Mediterranean plants cannot cope with being wet. You can plant with grit or builder’s sharp sand. Acid soils will need horticultural grit.

**Companula Takesimana - Elizabeth** - Huge pink bell flowers from May to September, plant in semi-shade. Put some John Innes No.2 underneath when planting. Use slug pellets only in the 1st season. In the right position it will form a carpet.

**Companula Takesimana – Kent Bell** - Is a purple blue colour and doesn’t tend to form a carpet. It likes dryish shade. Use slug pellets for the 1st year, no need after that.

**Companula Glomerata – Alba** -Good plant for dry shade. Has a white flower and will carpet after 2 years and isn’t troubled by slugs.

**Carex Caymens – Milk Chocolate** – It is clump forming so leave it an extra season before you divide it. In the spring cut off the old foliage to 4”. It needs to be in the sun with good drainage.

**Carex Evergold** – Doesn’t mind some shade but does need good drainage.

**Aster Facartti Monch** – Will flower from end of June through to end of October. Will not suffer with rust or mildew. Will carpet but doesn’t flop.

**Sun flower – Happy Days** - Grows less than 1m tall and repeat flowers all summer. Don’t plant in a windy spot.

**Verbascum (Mullein)** – It is a showpiece plant for the back of the border. It will grow up to 7’ on a free draining sunny sight that is protected from wind. It has a symbiotic relationship with the Mullein Moth. It can only be pollinated by this moth, but the caterpillars of the moth leave its leaves threadbare. Its foliage is huge and felty. There are 2 varieties: **Olympicum,** which is multi stemmed and yellow; the other is **Canasium\*,** which is white with a single stem. Buy just one plant which will drift provided it is given the right conditions in the first place.

**Digitalis Pavifloris** – Will stay put for 7 to 8 years and form a carpet.

**Geranium Silver Cloak** – Doesn’t mind sun or shade. It will flower for two and a half months.

**Iris Pallida Varigata** – A lovely Iris with purple flowers that have a yellow throat.

**Anthriscus Sylvestris – Ravenswing** – A short lived perennial with purple foliage and white flowers. A form of Cowparsley. Likes moist but well drained site. Will flower all summer long.

**Kniphoia** – Grows up to 3’ high. Likes a well drained sunny position.

**Geum – Bell Bank** – Has a variegated flower, it likes cool damp soil with good drainage. Best in semi-shade. Should be divided every three years.

**Schizostylis – Mollie Gould** - Has pink flowers from September through to November / December. It likes moist well drained soil and full sun. Evergreen, it will form a carpet after about 5 years. Goes well with grasses.

After the break Roger gave a demonstration of splitting the root ball of herbaceous plants. The time to divide plants is when they are almost dormant after a couple of frosts and the daytime temperature is 9/10oC. October is a good month as the soil is warmer than in November/December.

Roger uses a short handled spade which has a pointed blade that is very sharp. They are available from builder’s merchants where they are sold as trenching tools. The cost is approximately £14 plus V.A.T.

Having marked the position of a plant while it is still in leaf, dig around it and lift it out of the ground. Place the plant on a firm surface and look for the natural break points, then push the spade down firmly to slice through the root-ball. Divide as necessary, cutting out anything that is nasty or dead. If the roots are damaged it is important to remove some of the top growth to keep a balance so that the roots of the plant can adequately support the top. Replant the original plant and mulch around but not over it. The warmth of the mulch will help the roots re-grow. The new plantlets can be potted up to grow on.

Following the demonstration Roger gave some more gardening tips and answered some questions.

**Liriope – Muscari** – A pale pink flowering bulb that carpets well. Sometimes called Lily turf. It likes dry shade and is a woodland plant.

**Oenothera Missouriensis** – A form of Evening primrose that likes a sunny dry bank and will flower freely for a long period.

**Verbena Bonariensis** – A tall growing purple flowered plant that drifts. It loves poor soil on a stony bank. Leave the seed heads for the birds. It looks particularly good when planted with lavender.

**Libertia** – Has evergreen blades with a white flower that zig-zag up each spike. It likes well drained soil in full sun.

**Pruning roses** – give them a gentle prune in the autumn. Mid February prune hard but always leave 3 nodes in case of die back.

**Camelias** -should be pruned after flowering. They should be planted in acid soil, under trees to give dappled shade and provide leaf mulch. Fighting the tree roots will encourage the Camelia to flower. Make sure it has plenty of water during September and October as this is when the flower buds form. Keep a check on the leaves for signs of Vine Weevil, which will form a C shaped notch in the leaves.

**Eucalyptus** – has a round juvenile leaf but a spindle shaped adult leaf. To keep a round leaf the plant must be pruned and kept as a bush.