

THE FIRST CUT IS THE DEEPEST

Colin Moat

As someone who feels they have learnt more about plants by digging them up than by planting them, I had rashly volunteered to have a propagating workshop for the HPS Kent Group. All members had to do was bring along a sharp knife. Which explained how I found myself faced, one spring day, with the rather surprising sight of eight ladies, clutching a rather intimidating array of vicious looking implements. What I hadn't realised at the time was that one of the group happened to be the Editor of our Ranunculaceae Group Newsletter. One of the subjects of my dissection technique was a thalictrum, and Karin's knife looked particularly sharp; this is the reason you are reading this!

I am immensely fond of meadow rue, and I would like to share one of the techniques with which I have had success to ensure my nursery had plenty to offer. Obviously, for a lot of the species propagation by seed and straightforward division should suffice for most gardeners but, if you wish, you can take it one stage further.

Either way, I always start by washing off all the soil or potting compost from the roots; this enables you to get a clear view of the situation. In spring, *Thalictrum* produces basal shoots from the parent stem and you are faced with possibly 3 or 4 new shoots that have developed from the now defunct stem. It is fairly straightforward to prise these apart and dispose of the old parent stem. If these are sufficient for your need then I would suggest potting each separated shoot into potting compost, and then planting out once it is in growth and has developed a decent root system.

If, however, you are a greedy nurseryman, you can go one (or two) stage(s) further by selecting shoots about the thickness of a pencil and above. Taking a very sharp knife (preferably with a thin blade) you chop off the top of the shoot above where it was in the ground/pot (you should see a change in colour of the stem). Then consider the stem carefully (at this point I have to put on my reading glasses!) and you will notice around the base of the shoot and above the roots are many bulges, which are dormant shoots. I suspect that these are insurance against grazing (as a meadow plant) as there are far more bulges than there ever are new shoots. You will also notice that the shoot has a curve, where it has grown away from last year's parent stem. So, placing it on the bench with the curve upwards, and starting from the top (chopped) end and ending in the rooted part, you slice the remaining stem in half. If you are careful, you can then do the same operation on these two halves (possibly following the curve) so that you have four quarters with, hopefully, dormant shoots on the outside, and roots!

Then it's potting up the quarters into a 9cm pot with a free draining compost, as you don't want what is essentially a rooted cutting, sitting in soggy compost. I give them a bit of protection against the elements in an unheated greenhouse. They should show signs of growth in 2 to 3 weeks, but don't be too quick to move them on. Possibly in 4 to 6 weeks (better to leave it longer if necessary) when they have encouraging top growth and roots showing at the bottom, you can then pot them on. You might find one or two fall by the wayside but I expect about 90% success.

You can put the knife down now, Karin!

[Ranunculaceae Group Newsletter Editor, Karin Proudfoot, added 'I am happy to report that no nurserymen were hurt during the production of this article!']

~ First published in the Ranunculaceae Group Newsletter, Autumn 2014 ~