

Cutting up in autumn

Derrick Rooney¹

If you happened to be passing my garden in February, and if it were not hidden from casual sight by a peripheral boscage of trees and shrubs, you might see me, bum up and head down, scraping away with a hand-fork.

No, I won't be weeding. The removal of weeds in this operation is merely a bonus. In fact, I will be looking for, and trying not to damage, dormant rhizomes or tubers of a few unusual perennials that can be propagated safely only before autumn rains prompt them to sprout again.

The rhizomes belong to an eccentric plant in the buttercup family that flowers without foliage in late winter, and in early spring sprouts leaves that look as if they should be on a carrot. Its name is *Adonis amurensis* (Figure 1). The original Adonis was a mythical Greek youth who believed himself to be so beautiful that he fell in love with his own reflection. That should be a clue. This is one of the most beautiful winter flowers.

Like its namesake's reflection on the water, this plant is fugacious. It is above ground for only a few weeks after the flowers fade, and the only time at which it can safely be divided is in early autumn, while the crowns are dormant. Unfortunately, unless you have very carefully marked the spot, they can be very difficult to find. Both crown and roots are the colour of soil.

The owners of the tubers are a brace of hardy European or North African orchids. To many people the word orchid evokes visions of large, waxy, tropical flowers, but there are orchids in all of the world's climatic zones, and they include several herbaceous species that grow with ease in gardens. Two that I grow belong in the genus *Dactylorhiza*, which ranges from central and western Europe to the Canary Islands, which, although they lie off the coast of West Africa, insist on being Spanish. *Dactylorhiza foliosa* (Figure 2) has green leaves and can get to

60cm or more high. *Dactylorhiza maculata* reaches only half that height, and if you have already guessed that its most prominent distinguishing feature is spotted leaves, you have guessed rightly, because that is exactly what its specific name means. Both have spikes of rosy purple flowers that do not look, at a casual glance, to be up to much. When you look at them closely, however, you can see that their structure is complex and quite beautiful. They are what are sometimes called connoisseur's plants.

A number of beardless irises can also be propagated in late summer: the Louisiana hybrids, most of the Pacific Coast hybrids, and the so-called Algerian iris, *Iris unguicularis*, which flowers in late winter and early spring. Many growers propagate the latter after it flowers, but this method can be counter-productive by causing the loss of a season's flowering. All the forms of this iris except the Turkish variety *lazica*, which is evergreen, begin their main period of root growth in winter, and it is root growth that determines the success of divisions. You don't have to be the Brain of Britain to work out that the most efficient time to divide a plant is just before it begins a period of vigorous root growth.

The Himalayan *Iris wattii*, a distinctive plant with large, lilac-blue spring flowers and broad fans of green leaves on lanky, bamboo-like stems, will grow from stem cuttings, taken now. This iris is none too hardy, and even in warm gardens cannot be relied on to flower every year. Winters in my garden knock it about so much that it never flowers. The closely related *I. confusa*, from Yunnan, is hardier, similar in stem and leaf, but inferior in flower. Its petals are small and white. 'Nada', an old hybrid of the two species, is a charmer. Its little white flowers have a bold orange crest. Both these species and their hybrids grow readily from cuttings, a somewhat unusual way of propagating irises.

Derrick Rooney is a life member of the RNZIH. He has written a weekly column on gardening and plants for The Press, Christchurch, since 1979, and his articles have appeared in numerous specialist journals. He contributed a chapter to Putaringamotu, the book about Riccarton Bush, Christchurch's unique native bush reserve. For several years he ran a small mail-order nursery selling rare plants, but closed it because, he says, "it was taking so much of my time that I had no chance to do any gardening." He now grows plants strictly as a hobby. Derrick and his wife, Kath, live in Hororata, in Central Canterbury, but own a 54ha hill-country block in South Canterbury, part of which has been covenanted to the Queen Elizabeth II National Trust.



Figure 1. The early-flowering *Adonis amurensis*.



Figure 2. The beautiful terrestrial orchid *Dactylorhiza foliosa*.

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