

"Just Add Water"

Articles and Photos by Soni Forsman

'Tis Almost the Season to Divide Hardy Water Lilies

As I look out the window at our snow-covered yard and gardens, late April/early May seems sometime in the distant future but it is just two months away. These few weeks in mid-spring are the prime time to divide hardy water lilies. Tackling the task then gives the water lilies ample time to reestablish themselves and flourish all in the same year.

Telltale signs that a water lily needs to be divided include – rhizome growing out of the container, roots and rhizome fill the pot leaving little room to insert fertilizer tablets and/or pads were small last year and flowering sparse.

Even if the water lily exhibits none of the above symptoms and it was not divided the previous year, it should be done this year. It favorably responds to the rejuvenation of its rootstock, fresh soil and a dose of fertilizer.

Hardy water lilies are easy to divide, repot and are forgiving of their handlers' unintentional mistreatment. Dividing means removing the biggest and best growing points (eyes) from the old rhizome and repotting into fresh planting medium and adding food.

Begin by gently removing the plant from its container. Wash away the soil with a strong spray of water from the garden hose. The rootstock and growing eyes are now visible. Determine the strongest eye(s). Make a sharp cut, removing the tip(s) with a couple inches of rhizome.

Select a container that measures wider than deep. This will accommodate the horizontal spread of the rhizome. An eight or 10-inch hanging basket (sans hanger) works well. Fill about one-half with a good quality top soil preferably with some clay. Mix in a granular aquatic fertilizer. Hold the rhizome with the cut edge near the container's outer edge pointing the growing eye toward the center and up. Resume adding soil to one-inch from the top. Rhizome should be covered with soil and the growing tip is visible. Water thoroughly. Still keeping the tip exposed, fill the top inch with gravel – pea gravel to five-eighth inch-size river rock. I only plant one growing tip per pot. You can individually pot up others for yourself or to share with friends or donate the un-potted rhizome(s) to your garden club plant sale.

If top soil with some clay is not available, bagged top soil can be purchased from garden centers in the spring. Commercially produced aquatic soil is available in bags. Generic kitty litter, baked clay without additives or deodorants is also an option. Biggest negative to litter is it contains no nutrients and does not retain fertilizer as well as garden soil. Frequent feeding is necessary. Do not use bagged potting mixes intended for hanging baskets and containers. It is lightweight and tends to wash out. To keep the planting medium in containers with drain holes, line with landscape fabric or several layers of newspapers before filling.

Return the refreshed water lily to the water garden. I grow my water lilies with nine- to 15-inches of water over the top of the containers, usually 12-inches. To adjust the height, if needed, use inverted plastic pots, bricks or plastic storage 'milk' crates.

Throughout the summer, feed with an aquatic fertilizer following the directions. Most recommend one tablet for every gallon of soil applied once a month. During the warmer month, June – August, I increase the once a month recommendation to twice a month. Do not increase dosage if using a time-release product.

Routinely remove the spent blooms to encourage flowering and prune off yellowing or damaged foliage to keep decaying plant material out of the water. Basic maintenance makes a pristine water garden.



The rhizome of a medium-size waterlily with the soil washed away. Primary growing tip is foreground, another in the back. Smaller ones on the right



Nymphaea 'Helvola' rhizome with growing eye readying for planting it a six- or eight-inch bulb pan, appropriate size for small waterlilies\\



Nymphaea 'Helvola' growing in a water bowl.