

Dividing Perennials

Perennials are the plants that just keep giving. As perennials grow, we enjoy their blooms, foliage and continued growth until the time that flowers become scarce or they outgrow their space. Depending on the perennial, these plants generally benefit from a division every 3-5 years. This gardening task not only multiplies the plants you have in your garden, but also allows for an opportunity to amend the soil and change your flower bed layout.

A few perennials, often those that bloom midsummer like daylilies, prefer to be divided in the early spring. Although it doesn't hurt the plant to divide them in the fall with the rest of your perennials, you may perform the task at the sacrifice of one year's blooms.

Perennials that bloom in the spring, like iris, peony and poppy, prefer divisions in the late summer or early fall. Perennial plants can be divided any time of year, but recognize that doing so in the "wrong" or "off" season may impact blooms and overall vigor for the first year. Division can often seem like a daunting task but plants readily propagate themselves and are often much stronger than we give them credit for.

The first step in division is to trim back the foliage to 6". This will make it easier to manage the plant as you dig and divide. Clean cut leaves can grow back much easier than foliage mangled and torn by a shovel. Using a garden fork or shovel, dig all the way around the plant and lift from underneath the crown. You won't be able to get all of the plant's roots, but the majority should come up in this upheaval.

Remove excess soil so you can see the individual roots. Discard any parts of the plant that are dead, diseased or heavily damaged by insects. Using a sharp shovel or knife cut large sections off of the plant. Each section should have a ball of roots, three to five buds and some foliage. The smaller section you cut, the more likely you may lose a few of the divisions but the longer you'll be able to go between division years.

If you do not immediately replant, protect the divisions from heat and sun while keeping the roots moist. In a cool garage or basement most plants can hold for a few days before replanting. Some plants, like iris may hold much longer. The sooner you replant, however, the less stress the plant will undergo and the more likely it will be to thrive.

When you replant your divisions, consider amending the soil first. After all, these plants may stay in this bed for the next few years. Amend your flower bed in accordance with a soil test and if you have heavy clay soils, consider working compost into the entire bed as deeply as possible. Divisions should be planted at the same depth they were taken from. Planting too deep may cause the division to rot. After you re-plant water each plant in—even if there is a forecast for rain. A plant is not planted until it watered in!

As you move perennials around your garden, make sure the new home you select meets all of their needs. Water and soil amendments are important as are light requirements. No amount of care will ever make a shade loving plant thrive in full sun or vice versa.

Examples of perennials that prefer shade are hosta, astilbe, coralbells, bleeding heart, lily of the valley and columbine. Sun-loving perennial gardens include coneflower, hardy salvia, veronica, statice, baby's breath, phlox, soapwort, pincushion flower, coreopsis and sedum.

Dividing perennials is an excellent time to evaluate the health of your plants and remove any that may be diseased or otherwise in decline. Hosta X Virus is a disease that causes mottling and distorted growth on hosta plants. There is no cure and infected plants need to be disposed of to limit disease spread. If you begin dividing and notice something unusual about one of your plants, contact your local extension office before proceeding. In the example of Hosta X Virus, I would leave the plant until the very last, remove it entirely and thoroughly clean all tools. If you started with that plant not knowing that it was diseased and divided most of your hosta, you would likely spread it to all your healthy plants.

It's important to keep in mind that some perennials may prefer to be left alone. Peonies can be divided but don't need it nearly as often as hosta or iris. Look for signals from the plant that they're ready to be divided. Plants in need of division may have reduced flowering or small flowers, center growth dieback, low vigor, flopping or spilling over flower bed edges or onto other plants. It's much more important to look for these signals from the plant than to follow an exact calendar.