



Time and Hints to Take Home

Perennials

When a gardener wants to have a beautiful flower garden with abundant blooms, it is likely they will choose perennials to put on the show. *Herbaceous perennials* are those plants with soft tissue stems (rather than woody stems like shrubs) that die back each winter but are hardy and return each spring. Common types include plants like Peonies with substantial stems or Pinks with very dainty stems. Be sure to check hardiness ratings for any plants you add to your perennial border. In our area, we can use varieties that range from very hardy, USDA Zones 1 or 2 up to USDA Zones 3 to 4. Gardeners on Flathead Lake can try types that range up to Zone 5 and sometimes even have success with tender Zone 6 perennials.

Dividing Perennials



Although perennials are often thought of as no or low maintenance plants, almost all perennials benefit from attentive care. One of the most important chores is *division*. Division means digging up and dividing the plant. Some perennials will die out completely in 4-5 years if they are not divided. Many more will perform poorly and struggle. Some types like peonies, actually resent division and are best left alone for many years. This handout will go over why, when and how to divide plants and discuss some general rules for all perennials.

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Why should you divide your perennials?

If you have had a plant for 3-5 years, you may have crowding or plants that have actually taken over a spot and are simply too big. Three years is really the minimum amount of time you should allow a plant to become established and show you what it can do. Controlling spread and growth (root and stem growth, not height) is one reason to divide your plants. You may also decide to divide a perennial to rejuvenate a plant that is old, perhaps performing poorly and will benefit from division. The third reason is to have more plants either for yourself or to give away. This last reason is actually one of the most important reasons to divide your perennials.

You can divide a plant to create more plants that you immediately plant elsewhere in your garden or share with others. While many perennials reproduce by seed, most also reproduce vegetatively, that is by sending out new stems and roots that can be divided into new plants. Divisions are considered superior to seed in many instances because many varieties are cultivars that do not seed 'true' to the parent plant. It is not unusual for the color or some other quality to not pass on through the seeds. Divisions on the other hand are almost always reliably true to the parent plant.

When do you divide your perennials?

The very general rule of thumb for when to divide a plant is this: If it flowers in spring or early summer, divide it in fall. If it flowers in late summer or fall, divide it in spring. Keep in mind however that this is a general rule and there will always be exceptions. Of course, there are also plants that don't really care when you divide them and there certainly are plants that you can kill if you divide them at the wrong time.

It is always best to wait and give your plants at least

three years of growth before you consider dividing them. Very few plants can tolerate being divided earlier. If you are dividing plants in spring, do it as early as the ground is workable. In our area, we are usually dividing in spring about mid April through May. Fall division can start as early as the middle of August and run into late October. Some perennials can also be divided when they finish flowering during the growing season. Plants like Poppies or Bleeding Hearts go dormant in mid summer and can be divided as soon as their foliage begins to turn yellow.

How do you divide your perennials?

All perennials have different root systems and that is what you work with when dividing. Most fall into one of the following categories:

) **Fibrous Roots** - These are plants with stringy, fibrous roots. Each piece of root mass needs some of the above ground plant attached to it to live. This is called the 'crown' and is necessary for successful division. Daylily and Hosta are good examples of plants with fibrous roots and crowns. Groundcovers like Vinca with shallow fibrous roots can often just be sliced, lifted and moved intact to a new spot.

) **Tubers & Rhizomes** - These are plants with a solid, usually hefty, root. Tubers need at least 2-3 'eyes' on each piece to grow and can be cut up into more than one piece. Eyes look like little indents and are actually below ground buds on the plant. Peony tubers increase in size with age and can be cut into pieces to make more plants. Rhizomes are fleshy roots, similar to tubers except they have to have part of the above ground plant, the 'crown' again, to be successfully divided. Irises are good examples of rhizomes. The fleshy roots increase in size and new plants sprout up along the root. The root can be cut into pieces wherever there is a new plant sprouting.

) **Bulbs & Corms** - This includes tulips and daffodils. Bulb or corm making plants produce more bulbs or corms that are harvested and replanted. Some may take more than one season to produce flowers once they are

transplanted. Never cut a bulb or corm into pieces expecting it to reproduce. That is just not how it works.

The best day for dividing perennials is overcast, damp and maybe even raining slightly. Never divide on a hot day in the full sun. If you can't avoid a sunny day, set up to work on the plants in the shade and move them quickly to it when you dig them up. You should also have a hose and bucket of water nearby to prevent the plants from drying out. Have any areas you are moving plants to ready to be planted. If you are giving away plants, let the recipients know so they can be ready too.

The first step is to dig up the whole plant as a clump. A digging fork is the best tool for an established perennial. Shovels cut into tubers and roots and cause



damage. Dig a generously wide and deep circle and try to get as much root mass as possible. In spring, try not to disturb the emerging greenery too much and do not cut it back. Plants that prefer summer

division can generally have their greenery cut and it will come back. In fall, cut greenery down to about 2" high.

Determine what type of root system you have by breaking off a small clump and knocking the soil away. Shake off as much soil as you can. You can also soak the clump in the bucket with water or use the hose to wash off the soil.

If it is tubers or rhizomes, separate the pieces and clean off most of the soil so you can clearly see eyes for division. You may need to cut apart roots to untangle them. Many gardeners keep an old kitchen knife for this purpose. Keep the plants moist and shaded while you are working on them. A plant flat covered with damp burlap works great for this.

If it is a root mass with many plants, separate them by holding the plant and root and gently pulling to tease it out. You will likely lose some roots but if a plant has about as much root growth as green growth, it should be able to survive. You can also slice the entire root and top mass with a knife to make smaller clumps. These are very tender plants and it is best to plant them immediately. If you must hold them, keep them shaded and moist. Again, the plant flat with damp burlap works well.

With all types of plants, use the opportunity to remove any weeds, root and all. There is no point transplanting those!

Plant divisions of any kind as soon as possible. Treat it like you would any planting and water it in well. Do not fertilize fall plantings but fertilize generously in spring. The exception for planting immediately is bulbs and corms; you must hold these until the ground is cool enough to plant them, at least 50°F. Always plant bulbs and corms with fertilizers such as bone meal so they have nutrients waiting for them in spring.

A list of perennials and when to divide them is available with this handout. The Plant Land staff can answer any further questions you may have!