



Dividing Perennials

When a gardener wants to have a beautiful flower garden with abundant blooms, perennials are a good choice 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 sturdy stems or Pinks with very dainty stems. Be sure to check hardiness ratings for any plants you add to your perennial border. Look for 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.

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.

Let's start with why you might want to divide a perennial. 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. Perennials such as Bee Balm or Yarrow fall into this category. You may also decide to divide a perennial to rejuvenate a plant that is old, perhaps performing poorly and that will benefit from division. Siberian Irises are a good example of a plant that will decline with age but that can be rejuvenated by division. The third reason is to have more plants either for yourself or to give away. Just about every perennial falls into this category!

You can divide a plant to create more plants that you immediately plant elsewhere in your garden or share with others. While some perennials reproduce only by seed, the majorities 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 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 easy to research your plant's needs online at Plant Land's website or come by Plant Land for advice.

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 or 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 Oriental Poppies or Bleeding Hearts go dormant in midsummer and can be divided as soon as their foliage begins to turn yellow.

How do you divide your perennials? Perennials have different kinds of root systems and how you divide them depends on the type of root they have.

- ❧ Fibrous Roots - These are stringy, typically long and extensive 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. Fibrous rooted plants can be cut into pieces with each piece having part of the top and plenty of roots. An old serrated kitchen knife works great for 'sawing' through the root mass.
- ❧ 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 need 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 roots. The root can be cut into pieces wherever there is a new plant sprouting. You may need to cut apart roots to untangle them. Both tubers and rhizomes store their energy in the fleshy mass so attached fibrous roots are not important for success in division.
- ❧ 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. You can only use whole bulbs or corms. Daffodils are a good example of a plant that will nearly stop blooming and start again vigorously after division. If you dig bulbs or corms in early fall you should hold them until the ground is cool enough to plant them, at least 50°F. Keep them in a paper bag in a cool, dry place. Always plant bulbs and corms with a little bone meal so they have nutrients waiting for them in spring.

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. Keep the plants moist and shaded while you are working on them. A plant flat covered with damp burlap works great for this.

Dig up the whole plant as a clump. A digging fork is the best tool for an established perennial. Shovels can 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. 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. If you must wait store them in shade and keep the roots moist. You can put a little bone meal in the bottom of transplant holes to encourage root growth. Do not fertilize fall plantings but fertilize generously in spring with a balanced fertilizer such as 16-16-16. If fall weather is dry be sure to keep newly transplanted divisions evenly moist.

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