

Dividing and Transplanting Perennials

Presented by Suzanne Mahler

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Nearly all perennials benefit from regular division. Some plants with shallow root systems require only a gentle tug to be easily lifted and new plants can be formed by gently pulling segments apart. Others, especially overgrown ornamental grasses, Siberian irises, daylilies, and hostas, may demand more ruthless action to separate dense, woody, overgrown clumps. As a rule of thumb, early spring-bloomers are best divided and transplanted in autumn and fall-bloomers in spring. Plants that flower in between can usually be split in either season.

Why to divide: plants have outgrown allotted space; plants show a decline in vigor indicated by die out in center of a clump, smaller foliage and flowers or no flowers at all; more plants are desired to share with friends and family, for plant sales, or to grow in new gardens.

When to divide: early spring once plants begin to break dormancy but before hot weather (April and May) or late summer (late August into early October; 4-6 weeks before killing frosts) tend to be preferred. Dig and divide on cool, overcast days, preferably in the morning or evening when there is minimal wind.

How to divide: Perennials should be well-hydrated before division; water deeply a day or two in advance if soils are dry. Ideally, it is best to lift the entire plant to be divided; dig all the way around the perennial, 4 to 6 inches from the crown, if possible, with a pointed shovel or digging fork and pry underneath the root ball to lift the plant out of the hole.

For perennials with spreading roots (beebalm, Rudbeckia, Echinacea, tall phlox, lambs ear, yarrow, sedums, Shasta daisies, chrysanthemums, asters, etc.) simply pull segments apart or snip divisions with a clippers.

For tightly knit clumping perennials (daylilies, hostas, Siberian irises) dislodge soil from roots by dropping or shaking clumps to facilitate division. Cut back daylily and iris foliage by ½ (but not hosta leaves) to promote new root growth. The use of 2 pitchforks, back-to-back, inserted into the center of large overgrown clumps, often helps to begin the division process; screwdrivers, clippers, a hori-hori, old kitchen knives, or saws may be necessary. Cut only through the crown of the plant (1-2 inches) and pull or pry divisions apart to minimize root damage. Discard woody centers and weak growth but leave 3-5 fans, eyes, or divisions intact to ensure strong growth and flowering. Ornamental grasses, especially members of the Miscanthus family, may require an axe or saw to get through the dense, fibrous root systems; nearly all grasses are best divided or relocated in early spring.

For rhizomes (Solomon's Seal, bearded iris, etc.), lift and use a sharp knife or pruning shears to cut away old, non-productive, diseased, or rotted parts; trim foliage by one-half. Replant rhizomes just below the soil surface. Bearded irises are best transplanted in August but no later than early September to prevent heaving out of the ground during the winter months; the top of the rhizome should be exposed to sunlight just above the soil surface.

For peonies, lift roots in late September or early October taking care not to break off red buds (eyes); use a sharp knife or pruning shears to cut roots leaving at least 3 eyes per division. Reset roots with eyes 1-2 inches deep (if planted too deeply, plants will not bloom although it may take a year or two for divided plants to bloom again).

Caring for divisions: never allow plant roots to dry out during the division process; cover roots with soil until ready to relocate; for Siberian and Japanese iris, keep divisions damp by wrapping roots in wet newspaper or put in a bucket of water for a few hours; daylilies and bearded iris are more forgiving and can be left uncovered for several days. Replant in replenished soils at the same level the perennials were previously growing. Water deeply and monitor for moisture regularly, but do not overwater. If transplanting during hot weather, protect from direct sun with row covers, brown paper bags secured with stakes, or even a chair to prevent severe wilting. Late fall transplants should be monitored for heaving during freeze-thaw cycles and may benefit from a winter mulch after the ground freezes (salt marsh hay, shredded leaves, pine needles, or Xmas tree branches).

Plants that are difficult to divide due to brittle roots, taproots, or woody root systems: bleeding hearts, Baptisia, butterfly weed, monkshood, gas plant, lupines, baby's breath, euphorbias, oriental poppies, balloon flower, gaura, Russian sage, lavender, candy tuft.