

Garden Talk

Perennial Dividing

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Perennials are those flowering plants that come back year after year from their roots. The best flowers appear on perennials when they are at two years of age. After several successful seasons these blooming beauties can lose vitality and even die out in the middle. A little care and maintenance on your perennials will insure years of delight.

Most perennials benefit from regular division at 3-5 year intervals. The benefits are many; rejuvenation, new roots spread deep and help support increased flower counts. Dividing controls plant size as well. Some perennials are rather aggressive and can take over a flower bed if not kept in check. Dividing provides more plants to re-plant in other planting beds, give away as gifts or donate to charity plant sales.

There are signals to indicate when a perennial is ready to be divided. Assuming the plant is healthy and you feed and care for it, here's what to look for:

- ✓ Growth in the center of the plant starts to slow or die.
- ✓ Clumps of growth occur on the outside edges of the perennial.
- ✓ Reduced amount or frequency of blooms.
- ✓ Invasion of weeds within the plant.

Timing - Do you divide in spring or fall? In general, divide spring and early summer blooming plants in fall when blooms and foliage are fading or finished. Cut back the dead foliage to 6-8" prior to digging. This can be from late August through early November.

Fall blooming perennials should be divided in the spring. Do it when you begin to see new growth, but not too early in case of a late mountain freeze. The

key is to divide the plants early enough so they can get established in their new locations before the first frost or before the heat of summer arrives. This is typically the month of March depending on your elevation.

Which Plants? Clumping perennials divide best. Many perennials are hardy enough to tolerate dividing in either spring or fall. You may have to wait until next season for your perennial to bloom if you divide at the wrong time, but usually the plant is not permanently damaged. With the technique that follows it will be difficult to make a mistake. Most grasses will enjoy being divided in the spring season.

There are some perennials that don't respond well to division at all. Single stemmed shrub like Russian sage and salvia with long tap roots do not divide. Other examples are artemisia,

lavender, rosemary and columbine. Many of these plants produce seedlings that can be transplanted though.

Dividing the Plants - Dividing most perennials is relatively easy if you remember a few key things. Keep the exposure of the roots to light and air to a minimum. Protecting the plants roots is the key to success. If possible choose a cool, cloudy day for the dividing, to help keep plants from drying out.

Water the plants well a couple of days prior to the day planned for division. Dig carefully with a spade or spading fork. Get as many roots as possible.

Lift the entire plant out of the ground if possible. Place it on a tarp or something to contain the plants and soil. A wheelbarrow can some-



times work. A bucket of water nearby isn't a bad idea. Placing newly-dug plants in water will ease the shock of digging and provide moisture.

Remove some of the soil from around the plant so you can see the root formation. Dipping roots in a bucket of water mixed with my liquid "Root Stimulator" can not only dissolve some of the soil away from the roots, but encourage new root formation later. You can gently shake the plant or hose the plant down gently as well.

Separate the plants using the least severe means that will get the job done. Some plants can be separated easily with your hands by pulling apart the entwined roots. Others will require cutting with a knife. Many of the ornamental grasses will require more severe division with us of a machete or even an axe.

Make sure each section you divide has at least one bud, stem or crown and some roots. Cutting through the crown and root system is often the only way to divide plants, so don't be timid. Discard the middle portion of the mature plant if it is brown or extremely woody; you want to concentrate on the newer growth.

Replanting - Have the new planting bed ready and plant the divided perennials immediately. Remember to keep exposure to our mountain air and light to a minimum. If you are giving them away, pot them temporarily in a container and keep the roots moist. Do not plant all of the newly divided plants in the same area. The idea is to give them some growing room, not to crowd them.

Prepare the new planting bed ahead of time whenever possible. Especially when relocating to a new garden space. Avoid using manure in the bed. Manure is far too 'hot' for the exposed roots that will follow. Instead use my organic 'Mulch' with a 2-3 inch layer turned into the soil at one shovels depth. At the same

time add some of my specially blended plant food perfect for this job. Add 2-cups of my "All Natural Plant Flood: per 100 sq.ft. of garden bed and turn turned to one shovels depth. I like to save a step and turn the mulch and food into the new garden bed at the same time.

Reduce water use - At this stage in the division you can greatly reduce water use by also blending water absorbing "Soil Moist" crystals into the soil at the same time. This small white crystals hold 200 times their weight in water and reduce summer water needs in half. A very good idea for mountain gardens.

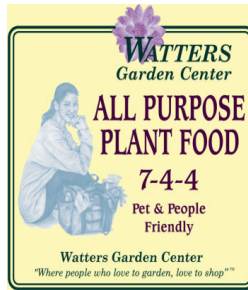
Water well with a solution of 'Root Stimulator' after planting to reduce the shock of dividing and transplanting. Label the "new" plants so you know what and where your new starts are.

Top dress the new bed with a 2 inch layer of shredded bark when complete. This will reduce water needs, keep the roots moist, and protect from late freezes. These easy steps will produce significantly more flowers for you next season.

If in doubt, bring a sample of the soil into the garden center with a digital photo of the space. We always have horticulturist on staff that love the process of dividing perennials.

Other items you will need for this project:

- ✓ **Gloves - a good pair**
- ✓ **Sharp shovel - possibly square English type**
- ✓ **Pruners & Hand trowel**



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