



Dividing Perennials

Some perennials grow very slowly and take a long time to get established, and some grow so quickly that in a few years they threaten to take over your garden. When perennials develop small or sparse foliage or bare spots in the middle it's a good indicator that there is too much competition for water, nutrients and space. Taking the time to lift and divide plants periodically will contribute to their continued health and to the size of your (or your neighbor's) garden.

Most perennials will recover quickly when divided in early spring. The weather is cool, there is usually plenty of moisture in the soil and the roots are full of stored energy. They can also be divided in late summer or early fall when the worst of summer's heat is over. Iris and peony seem to do better when divided in late summer. The only poor choice of a time to lift and divide perennials is in August, a hot month with little rain. If possible, lift and divide perennials when they are not in bud or bloom.

When dividing perennials, make sure that the plants are well-watered a couple of days ahead. Cut the foliage back to 6 to 8 inches. Use a shovel to dig under all 4 sides of the plant about 3 inches out from the edge. Lift out the clump to be divided, shake off the loose soil and remove any dead leaves or stems. Clumps with fibrous roots can be pulled apart by hand or with spading forks. Plants with tough, dense, roots (like hosta or daylily) may need to be cut apart with a knife or sharp spade. Discard the old centers of the plants as well as any soft, rotted roots. Make sure there are 3 to 5 vigorous shoots in each new division. Re-plant your divisions immediately if possible. If not they will hold for several days rolled up in moistened sections of newspapers. Be sure to water them well at planting and keep them moist for several weeks while new roots are forming.

Most perennials will need dividing every 3 to 5 years. Mulching perennials that are divided in late summer or fall will help keep them from heaving when the soil freezes and thaws.

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