



Dividing Perennials

Most perennials we grow in our garden need to occasionally be divided. Peonies and veronica are just a few of the perennials that will flower to their maximum potential and stay healthy and vigorous if divided every two or three years. On the other hand, some plants with only one main stem should never be divided. Dividing perennials is also a great way to multiply the number of plants you have, or even exchange with your gardening neighbors!

It can be confusing to keep track of ‘when’ dividing should be done. A good rule of thumb is to divide spring blooming perennials (such as bergenia) in the fall, and summer/fall bloomers (asters, for example) should be divided in the spring.

Ornamental grasses are also a perennial that greatly benefits from being divided. I often see large clumps of grasses where the center has died out – a sign that division hasn’t taken place as often as it should. If you see that in any of your perennials – divide it, and you’ll be rewarded with almost instant growth as the plant is rejuvenated.

Dividing a plant is actually quite easy, even though it might feel like you’re damaging it. To begin, cut the foliage (stems and leaves) to about 5-7.” Dig around the perennial to loosen the soil and to reduce damage to the roots. Lift the plant out of the soil, and shake off excess soil. Break the plant apart using a knife or sharp spade, making sure each division has developing shoots and roots intact.

It’s best to replant these divisions as soon as possible after cutting them, but they can survive for about a week if you put them in a bucket and keep the roots moist. When you do decide to replant, make sure you dig a hole large enough to accommodate the plant and give it adequate room to grow. You can plant one division back in the original spot, or move all of the divisions to new garden areas. Water the new plants in well, and provide a 2-4” layer of mulch especially for those transplanted in the fall. This can help them from heaving when the soil starts to freeze and thaw.

When dividing perennials, or even transplanting and moving plants, they should be replanted by mid-October. Any later, and you might run into early freezes before the plant develops good roots.

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