

They seem to live forever, but they do require attention. I'm referring to peonies. Perhaps the plant has become over-shadowed by a large tree causing it to bloom poorly. Sometimes older peonies become overcrowded with tangled roots causing them to bloom poorly. In either case, early fall is the best time to divide and replant peonies. Air temperatures are cooler while soil temperatures remain relatively warm and constant. Such conditions allow transplanted peony roots to grow and establish before the onset of winter.



Dividing a root system is a form of *asexual* reproduction. Each new division will have the exact genetics as the parent plant. Dividing herbaceous peonies is relatively simple.

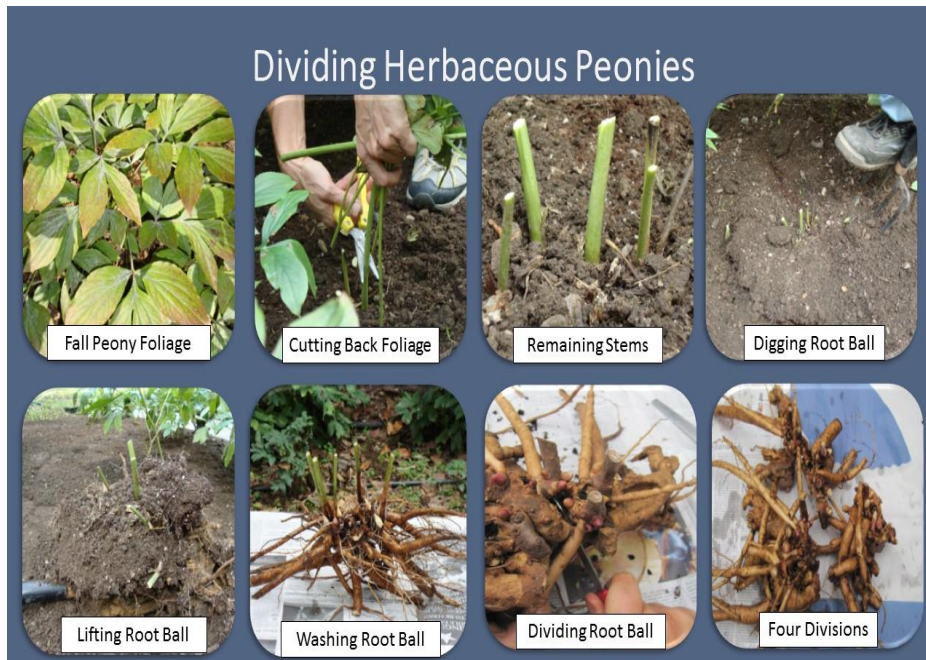
In the fall herbaceous peony leaves lose their luster and begin to die back for the winter. As they fade, they are no longer photosynthesizing. It is time for fall cleanup and care. If dividing, first cut the stems, but leave enough to aid in pulling the roots out of the ground. Completely dispose of the old peony vegetation. Avoid composting because old peony vegetation can be a source of fungal diseases.

Before digging, make sure the soil is moist but not wet. Carefully dig around the drip line of the peony. For a large clump, this should be at least fifteen inches from the center of the plant. A heavy duty fork works best. Dig around the clump more than once, loosening the soil to free the roots. Use the stems to ease the roots out of the ground. Rather than pulling straight up, work the root mass from side to side. Be aware that freshly dug peony roots are brittle. Once lifted, thoroughly wash away the soil from the roots. Cover the exposed roots with a damp towel and allow them to sit overnight. This will soften the roots and make dividing easier.

After allowing the roots to soften overnight, locate the eyes. The eyes of peony roots are bullet-shaped pink buds growing from the crown of the plant. Each eye represents a potential stem for next year. A new division needs ample roots. Too many eyes with just a little root will struggle to thrive. Use a large knife to make cuts dividing the peony root into four sections. Gently pry the pieces apart, carefully untangling the roots. When finished, you will have four new plants. These could be further divided, but it's best to have at least four eyes per division.

After separating and dividing, it's time to plant the new divisions. Select a planting site with quality topsoil, good drainage, sufficient air circulation and preferably full

sunlight. The planting hole should be large enough to accommodate the roots and deep enough so the eyes are planted one to two inches below the soil surface when covered. If the eyes are positioned too deeply, the plant will usually grow but produce few, if any, blooms.



Water well after planting. The goal is to establish root growth before the ground freezes. Continue to water when needed. Once the soil freezes, place a three-to-four inch protective mulch over the divisions using shredded leaves, straw or some other organic mulch material. Mulching prevents repeated freezing

and thawing of the soil — an action that can easily damage the plants. Remove the mulch in early spring before new growth appears. New divisions should be actively blooming in three to four years.

Once established, these peonies will reward you with years of beauty. There should be no need to divide again for many, many years.