Dividing Perennials

Perennials are herbaceous plants that flower once during the year, lose their foliage at the end of the growing season, and return from the roots in the spring. Examples of perennials found in Oklahoma include daylilies, irises, coneflowers, daisies, gaillardia, Hostas, among a host of others.

As perennials grow, they send out new shoots and roots around the original plant. Over time these new roots and shoots crowd each other causing competition for available light, water, and nutrients. As a result, they will eventually produce fewer and smaller blooms, display a general lack of vigor, and begin dying out at the plant center. Dividing the plant will help restore vigor, produce larger and more numerous blooms, and stimulate new growth.

Spring and fall are good times to divide and transplant perennials as the soil moisture is typically higher and air temperatures are milder. Dividing plants when not in bloom allows for the plant's energy to go to new root growth. Therefore, late summer and fall blooming plants are best divided in the spring while plants that bloom in the spring are best divided in the fall.

When preparing to divide, thoroughly water plants that are to be divided a day or two before transplanting. Trimming stems to about six inches or so will help to make transplants easier to handle and reduce water loss. Prepare an area for the transplants ahead of time by digging a hole large enough to accommodate the plant's entire root system and deep enough for the crown to be even with the soil surface.

When digging up the plant try to keep the root ball intact. Generally, digging 6–12" from the crown will suffice. Ring the entire area around the plant with a spade before prying it

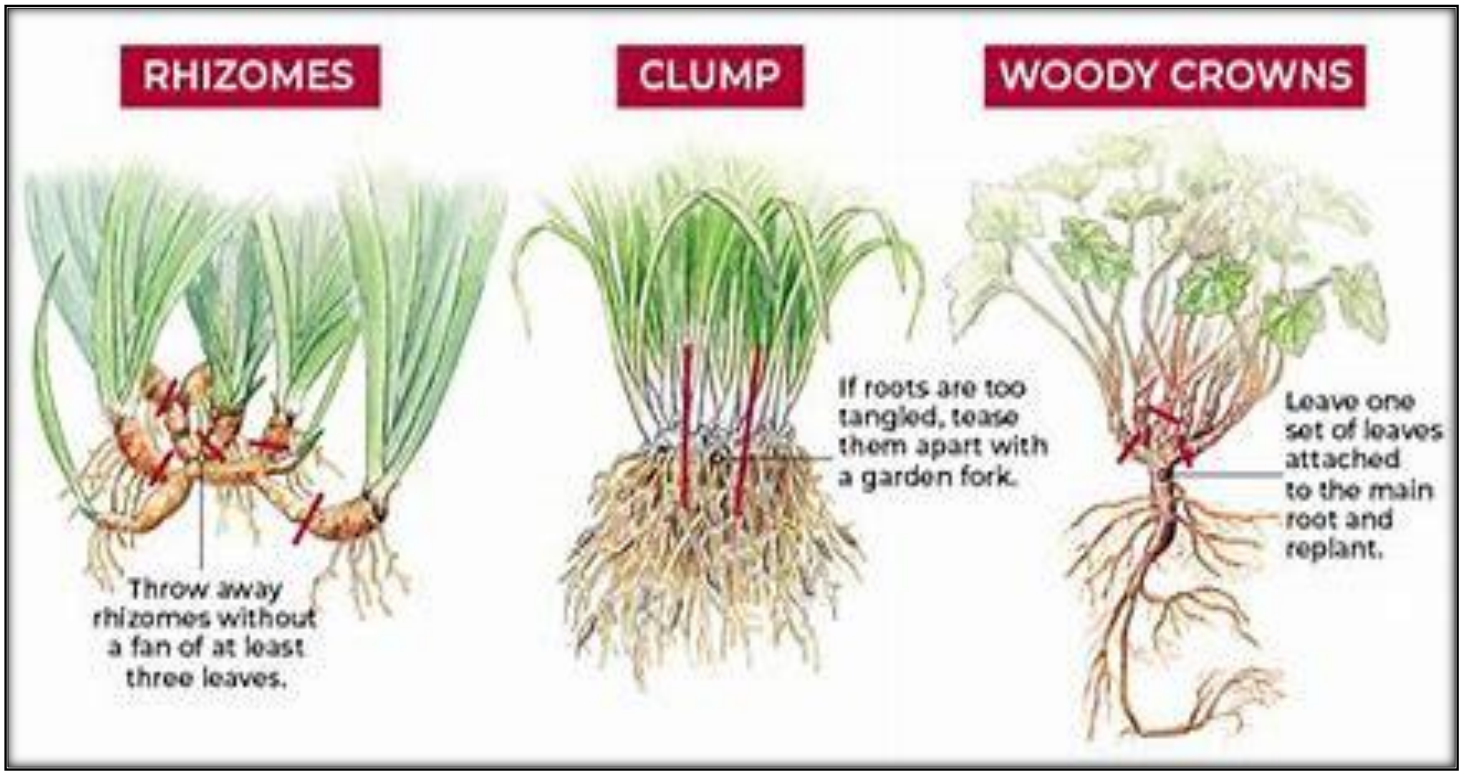
up. Then, pry underneath with that spade and lift out the entire clump. Shake or gently hose off loose soil.

Perennials have three basic root systems: clumping, spreading, and rhizomes.

CLUMPING: Perennials with clumping root systems originate from a central clump with multiple growing points. Clumping root systems may be divided using a sharp, heavy knife to cut through the thick, fleshy crown or roots may be pried apart using back-to-back digging forks. Keep at least one developing bud with each division. Examples include astilbes, Hostas, daylilies, and many ornamental grasses.

SPREADING: Perennials with spreading root systems (often with woody crowns) spread outward from a central crown with a wide, fibrous, shallow root system. Each new shoot is separate from the crown with a partially separate root system. Shoots may be separated by hand. Examples include asters, bee balm, lamb's ear, purple cornflowers,

RHIZOMES: Perennials with rhizomes have thick, fleshy underground stems that spread outward from the original plant at or just above soil level. Divisions should retain a few inches of rhizome and a fan of leaves trimmed back halfway. These are best divided using a sharp knife. When planting, cover the roots well but the rhizome should be shallow, less than an inch deep. Bearded Irises is the most common type of perennial with this type of root system



For most perennials new divisions should be planted with the crown at ground level.

Water new divisions immediately after planting and keep well-watered for a couple of weeks. Fall transplants may be mulched after the ground freezes but mulch should be removed in the spring to allow mother nature to naturally warm the soil.

Having said all of this, some plants resent being divided and it should be avoided if possible, including butterfly weed, euphorbias, oriental poppies, baby's breath, gas plant, Japanese anemones, false indigo, columbines, candytuft, lavender, rosemary, and artemisia.

Perennials adorn our gardens year after year with a variety of magnificent colors and distinctive foliage. Dividing perennials is a simple and inexpensive way to add these beauties to the landscape and to share with family and friends.

Resources:

Common Lawn and Garden Questions Answered by OSU Extension Tulsa Master Gardeners 2007-2015, ISBN-13:978-1499672049

Fact sheet HGIC1105, Clemson University: http://hgic.clemson.edu

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Weisenhorn, J. and Furgeson, M., 2019, *How and when to divide perennials*, University of Minnesota Extension