

Dividing Perennials

How is your garden looking so far this year? Did your spring and summer perennials produce a full flush of blooms as expected, or were there fewer or smaller blooms this year? Or perhaps the centers of the plants are weakened or sparse...or maybe they're getting too crowded for the space?

Perhaps you answered "no" to all of these questions and your perennials are at their peak size and health.

Did you know that a plant does not have to be in decline to benefit from division? In fact, the prime time to divide a perennial is when it's at its best! But either way, consider dividing your perennials to increase vigor, harvest new starters for open spaces, and overall, breathe new life into your garden.

If you've never divided a perennial plant, the Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service and other internet resources provide sound information on getting started. Read on...and follow the [links at the end of this article](#) to learn more.

What Plants Benefit from Division?

Most established perennials may be divided every few years. As always in the garden, exceptions abound! For instance, asters and garden mums may be divided yearly, peonies rarely need dividing, and butterfly weed should never be divided.

Understanding the growth habits and root structures of your perennial favorites should guide your hand. *Fine Gardening* magazine shares a list of common perennials and their division tips [here](#) on their website.

Know Before You Go: Tips for Dividing Success

While the process of dividing plants may be fundamentally simple, it pays to be educated and organized lest you'll be digging up your prized specimen and hacking its root system to bits.

Here are some things to know about dividing perennials before your pitchfork pierces the soil:

- **Root Structure:** Root structure varies. Know your root type to properly dig and divide without injuring the plant.
 - **Rhizome (ex. iris):** Dig carefully around the drip line of the mother plant, lift and cut divisions with sharp knife. Keep piece of rhizome, root and leaf section with each division.
 - **Woody (ex. sage):** Dig gently and sever where stems lying on the surface of the soil have rooted from the mother plant.
 - **Clumping/Offset (ex. hosta):** Dig and snip sections off at crown, ensuring several growing points per division.
 - **Surface (ex. sedum):** These run shallow and form individual crowns on the surface of the soil. Dig and gently cut healthy sections with ample roots and stems.

- **Taproot (ex. balloon flowers):** Similar to rhizome division, slice down center of taproot to incorporate a piece of taproot (with growing points or “eyes”) and side roots with each division.
- **Running (ex. hardy geraniums):** These underground “suckers” may be dug and snipped from the mother plant.
- **Plant and Root health:** Look for signs of insect damage, shriveling rhizomes, weakened or discolored roots and discard unhealthy parts. Replant only healthy divisions to give new plantings the best chance of survival. Usually those on the outside perimeter of the plant are younger and healthier.
- **When to divide:** Rule of green thumbs: divide opposite flowering and before the plant declines - optimally, divide the same year that the plant looks its best, and avoid dividing during flowering.
 - **TIPS:** Divide spring bloomers in fall, summer and fall bloomers in March, and water plants in April.
- **Tools:** Pitchfork, shovel, spade, pruners and sharp knife for cutting roots.
 - **TIPS:** Clean, sharp tools are critical to ensure roots remain undamaged. If disease is suspected, spray tools with a 10% bleach solution between cuts.
- **After Care:** Prepare the destination with fresh organic matter prior to dividing. Keep divisions moist and cool while they await replanting. Keep watered and mulch after replanting.
 - **TIPS:** Dunk divisions in a nearby bucket of water, or keep in moist newspaper if not planting right away. Holes should be big enough to contain the entire root system without twisting or curling the roots.

Quick Reference: Steps For Division

For those of us who make and follow lists, the below bullet point summary might be of help!

1. Research plant's growth habits, flowering times and root structure
2. Divide opposite blooming season
3. Assemble sharp and clean tools
4. Keep plants well watered in advance of dividing
5. Divisions should be no larger than 25% of the mother plant
6. Keep divisions watered and protected
7. Refresh destination location with organic matter prior to dividing
8. Plant with ample room to grow
9. Water and mulch well after planting to promote root growth

Dividing not only impacts the mother and divisions...it also benefits a crowded garden by freeing up depleted resources and space. Consider plant division as yet another tool for growing a healthy garden!

Dividing Perennials: Resources

[HLA-6408: Landscape Maintenance Schedule](#)

[Video: Oklahoma Gardening - Dividing Perennials](#)

[Fine Gardening: 10 Tips on Dividing Perennials](#)