Perennials: How to Dig and Divide!

Perennials are one of the many treasures in the garden but after time they may have outgrown their spot or just aren’t as vigorous as when they were first planted. These plants actually perform best when they are younger and have room to grow where they are planted. Even the oldest of perennials can be rejuvenated back to a full, happy life full of blooms! Here are our top 10 tips on how to divide and when!

1. If a plant is looking good, it’s time to divide!
If you have had a perennial in the ground several years and it is still looking top notch it is best to divide it at the end of the season before it starts going downhill in the coming seasons. Perennials are harder to divide once they have gotten to large, also if they have become so lack luster it is hard to rejuvenate them back to life. Watch for early signs of trouble such as weak blooming stalks in the center, fewer than normal flowers, or smaller leaves. If your plant is starting to show these symptoms it’s time to divide!

2. Dig around the root zone, not in it!
To ensure as minimal root damage as possible it is best to dig lift the perennial out of the ground by digging around the outermost drip line. It’s best to create a trench around the clump and then with a shovel go in and under the clump at several points until you can lift the perennial out of the dug hole.
To avoid damage to any new or current growth it’s best to divide early in the spring before growth really takes off or fall once you can cut the stems back.

3. Cool weather is better
You can divide nearly all perennials at any time of the year however the best time is when the soil temperature is staying warmer than the air temperature. This allows for a lot of root growth in the ground to get the division good and established before they set on a lot of top growth. Also, fall tends to be a preferred time to dig and divide because the new plants have more time to grow a new root system before the heat of summer.

4. Hold ‘em cool and hold ‘em moist!
If you can’t get your divisions back into the ground right away, or into a container it is best to hold the plants in an area where they stay cool and moist. They can be placed in a bucket or box in a cool, shady place and covered with newspaper to help prevent excess loss of moisture. If the roots happen to dry out before you get to replant them we recommend to soak them in a bucket with Ferti-Lome Root stimulator for about an hour to replenish their moisture before you transplant them back in the ground.

5. Put in what you take out!
Rule of thumb- if you take out a bucket full of soil, replace the bucket full of soil! It’s always nest to help maintain soil structure, fertility, and nutrients if you can replace the soil and perennial mass you moved by adding compost and organic matter back to the soil. This will ensure that any transplants or new plants are off to a healthy start!
6. **The best transplants are the most vigorous transplants!**
Once you have dug your clump and are ready to divide, it is best to divide your clump into about 4-6 sections depending on size. Perennials multiply quite fast—one stem can likely grow three or four times that size each season. By dividing into healthy yet, somewhat smaller divisions, you will get a more vigorous plant that will tend to have stronger growth and bloom the coming season.

7. **If in bloom, be extra gentle!**
Some would say that you shouldn’t divide a perennial when it is in bloom, however it can successfully be done. Some plants such as early spring bloomers or fall bloomers will fare just fine if given the extra bit of attention and carefulness in terms of keeping the roots healthy and hydrated.

8. **Healthy pieces are the way to go!**
If you are dividing a perennial plant that is on the decline you want to make sure you only transplant divisions that are healthy. If you transplant divisions that are weak and declining you are most likely going to end up with a plant that is more susceptible to pests and disease. If a plant has become crowded and weak before you got around to dividing it chances are the center section is what has been hit the hardest and the outer edges are the healthiest. Try and take divisions from the outer part but be sure to watch for discolored stems and/or roots.

9. **Give ‘em room to grow!**
When you go to replant your divisions you want to make sure your transplant goes into a hole that is at least as wide as its roots are when the roots are spread out. With many divisions it is easiest to make a mound in the hole in which to spread the roots over. This ensures that the tips are growing down as they would naturally and that your plant gets off to a running start!

10. **Know your roots!**
Perennials can be grouped in to five basic root types. Before you divide it is best to determine what root type you have (clumps/offsets, surface roots, underground running roots, taproots, or woody roots). This lets you know how to proceed with the dividing of the clump.
Root Types

Clumps/Offsets
Perennials that form clumps or offsets (small plants that grow at the base of a larger plant) should be divided by snapping the connection between any of the sections. Make sure you get plenty of nice roots and at least three or more growing points. Examples of this type would be Echinacea, Asters, Hosta, and Coreopsis.

Surface Roots
Perennials with surface roots tend to run on or just below the soil surface. When the plant reaches an open space or new soil they form a crown and roots. These plants can be divided by simply cutting between and of the stems leaving you two separate plants with roots and shoots. Examples of these plants would be Sedums, Rudbeckia, and Monarda.

Underground Running Roots
This type of root may also be referred to as a sucker. The ‘suckers’ can easily be cut away from the mother plant to be transplanted, or you can dig up the mother plant to separate into pieces with suckers already forming. Examples of these plants are Geraniums and Anemones.

Taproots
Perennials with taproots can be divided quite easily using a knife. Think of them like a potato- you just want to make sure you get a good eye or two with some viable looking roots. Examples of these plants would be Euphorbia and Papaver.

Woody Roots
Perennials with woody roots tend to form roots when a woody portion of the plant rests on the ground or becomes slightly buried in soil. These plants can be divided by simply cutting between the newly rooted plant and the mother plant. Examples of these plants would be Candytuft, Lithodora, Phlox, and Lavender.