

10 TIPS FOR DIVIDING PERENNIALS
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When dividing perennials, timing and technique are important. Perennial plants are healthiest and most productive when they are young and have room to spread.

TIP #1:

Divide when a plant looks good. Don't wait until the plant has become decrepit or too large to divide it. When it looks best, divide it at the end of that year. Watch for early signs of trouble: when the center of the plant has smaller leaves, fewer flowers and weaker blooming stalks than the outer edges, or when the plant runs out of growing room on its edges and has nowhere to go but into neighboring plants.

TIP #2:

Start at the dripline. To lift a perennial with minimal root damage, begin digging around the drip line. The drip line is the outermost point of the foliage. The roots will generally extend that far, so digging there will let you lift the plant with most of its roots intact. Dig a trench around the clump, cleanly severing any roots, then cut at an angle down and under the clump from various points around the outer edge until you can lever the plant out of the hole. For large heavy plants you may have to first dig the trench, then slice straight down through the center of the plant as if it were a pie, halving or quartering the clump before undercutting and lifting it. Usually, this is best done in Spring when the new growth is still low to the ground so the handling of stems is not an issue. In summer I might tie the stems together before lifting the plant and in the Fall, I cut them back before digging them for division.

TIP #3:

Divide in cool weather. Most perennials can be divided at any time of year if you give them appropriate care afterward. But for the quickest reestablishment, divide when the soil is warmer than the air for at least part of every 24 hour period. That's just before peak daffodil season in Spring. *Note: In mountain climates, it is important not to wait too long in the Fall, as the roots may not have time to establish themselves before winter arrives.* These conditions will allow the roots of the division to grow while the tops stay low out of the sun. For some plants, like peonies, it is better to divide in late in the Fall, after dormancy rather than in the Spring. This means you have to dig the new hole before the ground freezes! Divide fall bloomers in September if it's expedient, but if possible, leave them to bloom undisturbed and divide them in spring.

TIP #4:

Keep roots cool and moist. 50% humidity and 50° are the best conditions for holding divisions until you can get them back into the ground. You can pot them or you can put them in a bucket or a box in a cool shaded place and cover them with newspaper to retard moisture loss. Sprinkle water to

dampen the newspaper if the roots seem to be drying during their hold time. If the divisions dry out, don't despair. Soak them in a bucket of water for about an hour before replanting.

TIP #5:

Replenish soil with organic matter. If you remove a wheelbarrow full of perennials, then you should put a wheelbarrow full of compost back into that site before replanting to renew the soil, stay ahead of pest problems and maintain fertility. Without additions the plants will not have the advantage of renewed fertile soil and the bed will settle after planting, putting the plants at a disadvantage in terms of drainage and air circulation.

TIP #6:

Use vigorous sections first. After dividing, replant pieces that are 20 to 25% of the original clump. Smaller sections grow more vigorously and tend to produce stronger, longer lasting blooms. Dividing a hosta, for example, into pieces with about seven growing points will yield the best results. Perennials multiply exponentially. One stem is likely to triple or quadruple itself each year so if all you do is halve an overgrown clump this year, it will more than double in a season in need dividing again the next year.

TIP #7:

Take extra care when a plant is in bloom. Sometimes dividing plants when they're blooming is the only option. Plants in bloom may not be capable of growing as many new roots quickly as non-blooming plants. Pinching out some of the blooms may be helpful.

TIP # 8:

Keep only the healthiest pieces. If you wait until a perennial is declining, has a dead center or has succumbed to pest problems because it has become crowded and weak, be sure to replant only the healthiest pieces. Usually these are the outside sections rather than a center section. Watch for discolored stems and eroded crowns and roots.





TIP #9:

Spread out your divisions when re-planting. Place a division into a hole that it is at least as wide as its roots when spread out. Don't turn a root tip up rather than down or curl it back around on its self to fit into an under-size hole, because you'll defeat the plant's natural regrowth mechanisms.

Root tip growth is regulated in part by chemicals, flowing down from the tips of leafy systems to the roots. As an all flows, gravity is involved so if you plant a root tip up when it was down, the normal flow is interrupted. At least temporarily that root tip will not grow as vigorously as it could.

TIP #10:

Let the roots be your guide. When you dig up a perennial you will see that it fits into one of five basic root types:

- roots that form clumps or offsets
- surface roots
- underground running routes
- tap roots,
- or woody roots

How you proceed depends on what route type your plant has.

Offsets: to divide a plant whose roots form offsets (small plants growing at the base of a larger one), snap the connection between any of the sections to obtain a piece with ample roots and three or more eyes. Some denser clumps may have to be cut apart.

Surface roots: some perennials have roots that run on or just below the surface of the soil. They form new crowns and roots when they reach open spaces or make contact with the soil. If you cut between any of the stems as you would cut a piece of sod from a lawn, you will have a division with its own stems and roots. Creeping sedum is a good example of this.

Tap roots: plants that have taproots can be divided by using a sharp knife to slice down the length of the root. Every piece that has at least one eye, some of the taproot and a few side roots is a viable division.

Underground running roots: underground running routes can develop suckers as they grow beyond the shade of the mother clump. These suckers can be cut away from the main plant or you can dig up the main plant and cut away any piece with an eye or sucker already forming. These include Hardy geraniums.

Woody roots: woody perennials often form roots when stems rest on the ground or are buried by gradually accumulating mulch. Make a new plant by simply cutting between the rooted stem and the mother plant. Lavender and sage are good examples of woody root plants.
