

## Dividing Perennials

### It's that time! Early spring, early fall: Divide those perennials

I. That's *indoor* as well as *outdoor* perennials. Not "only-" but best time.

### II. Knowing when a plant's reached a size/age to be divided

- A. The plant gives signals: Smaller leaves, less bloom, weak center
- B. *You* may decide you need more, want more, want to move/change

### III. How often? Why now?

A. Outdoors, average 4-5 years to maintain size, youthful vigor, health

1. Keeps plants from overgrowing an area or becoming ungainly
  - Some almost too big and tough to divide if left longer
2. Keeps in check: Root insects, fungal- and bacterial diseases
  - May prevent dying out in middle, flopping open before bloom
3. Indoors, by growth rate, allowable pot size...

B. Divide right before a growth spurt

1. Spring or fall, when soil is warmer than air. When roots grow rather than tops!
  - Another option, go by bloom season: Fall bloomers in spring and vice versa
3. *Can* divide anytime. May need follow-up pampering shade, water

C. Some average outdoor perennials (divide every 4-5 years):

- Bee balm (*Monarda didyma*)
- Black-eyed Susan (*Rudbeckia*)
- Daylily (*Hemerocallis*, esp. repeat bloomers)
- False sunflower (*Heliopsis scabra*)
- Hosta (*Hosta* species and varieties)
- Iris (*Iris germanica* hybrids, *I. sibirica*, others)
- Ornamental grasses: maiden, fountain, feather reed, blue fescue (*Miscanthus sinensis*, *Pennisetum alopecuroides*, *Calamagrostis acut. stricta*, *Festuca ovina glauca*, others)
- Tall sedum (*Sedum* / *Telephium spectabile*)

D. Divide more often (every 2-3 years):

- Daisy (*Leucanthemum superbum*)
- Mum (*Chrysanthemum x morifolium*)
- Coral bells (*Heuchera* hybrids)
- Aster (*Aster novae-angliae*, *A. novae-belgii*)
- Golden Marguerite (*Anthemis tinctoria*)
- Coreopsis (*Coreopsis lanceolata*, *C. verticillata*)
- 'Blue Clips' bellflower (*Campanula carpatica*)
- Tall phlox (*Phlox paniculata* and *P. maculata*)
- White / pink / red yarrows (*Achillea millefolium*)

E. Divide infrequently or not at all

1. Long lived species, can stay in one spot a long time
  - Still, no denying bigger/better blooms on young plants
2. May have reputation "don't disturb" - misleading
  - Gas plant (*Dictamnus purpureus*)
  - Peony (*Paeonia lactiflora*)
  - Bleeding heart (*Dicentra spectabilis*)
  - False indigo (*Baptisia australis*)
  - Balloon flower (*Platycodon grandiflorus*)
  - Windflower (*Pulsatilla vulgaris*)
  - Hardy hibiscus/swamp mallow (*H. moscheutos*)
  - Perennial geranium (*G. sanguineum*, *G. cinereum*)

### IV. How to divide

A. Learn types of roots: Running root, tap root, offsets, woody sub-shrub

1. Surface-running; Examples: *Ajuga*, bee balm
2. Runs below surface: Japanese anemone, ostrich fern
3. Tap roots (primary, central vertical): balloon flower, windflower
4. Offsets (expanding crown): daisy, aster, hosta, peony, daylily
5. Woody, sub-shrub: lavender, sage, pinks, creeping phlox

## B. Tools for dividing

1. Spade and or fork, for digging out and replanting
2. Spade, 2 forks, sharp knife or ax for dividing
3. Hose or bucket for rinsing off roots and watering-in

## C. Handling the plant

1. Lift it, begin digging at drip line
2. Identify growing eyes or sections  
Rinsing off the roots can be helpful, at least first time  
Three growing points makes a garden center's 8" pot
3. May be best to discard the center, oldest part
4. Slice to divide
  - Clean cuts seal best (like clipping back torn cuticle on your finger)
  - Dusting with fungicide not essential if replanting right away
  - No need to cut back (even the flowers), and can be harmful to significantly reduce foliage in high summer
5. Replant
  - Soak in water before replanting
  - Must hold? Put in cool place where won't dry out  
(in garbage bag on cold cement floor, can last weeks, months!)
  - Renew *and level* soil if replanting in same spot
  - Spread roots naturally, wide
  - Plant at same depth was previously growing
  - Water in well
  - Protect if moved "out of season": shade it, give wind screen, stake or mulch heavily

## V. Most-asked questions about dividing

### A. The books say divide it in (certain month)

1. May be reason it's best then:
  - Insect control in iris
  - Peony less brittle, less disease spread into broken roots in fall
2. But other times not ruled out. Do what's best for *you*!

### B. The books say "don't disturb it" or it "resents disturbance."

1. Proceed with care but don't be scared off  
Some warnings based on one (influential) gardener's bad experience repeated until it becomes "fact."
2. Plant may sulk after the move

### C. Must I lift the whole plant?

1. No, but good idea to do it at least occasionally
2. Always worth it for the rapid increase and better bloom of divisions
3. Consider: If continually take away the outer pieces, as to keep
  - fast-spreaders in place or get starts of a slow but desirable plant, will be left with only the old, least vigorous center.
  - Will remainder be centered in the spot where it belongs?

D. Should I worry about disease and insects spreading?

1. Yes, if original plant had a *significant* problem
  - Beneficial insects, fungi and bacteria can also move with divisions
2. Preventive measures:
  - Rinse roots and crown thoroughly
  - Clip top back if reducing chance of carrying insects/eggs
  - Discard distorted, rotted, suspect sections
  - Don't divide/don't take plants suspected of viral problems or root/stem nematodes. Viral - watch for distorted growth, discolored tissues that don't die. Nematodes - watch for distorted roots & stems

**Recommended reading:** in order from for everything and everyone to serious specialist

**American Horticultural Society Plant Propagation**

Alan Toogood, Ed.; Dorling Kindersley, publ.

**Asking About Asters: Complete Library of Macunovich How-to**

CD, 1,200+ printed, illustrated pages of advice; JMaxGarden@aol.com

**Propagation: Fine Gardening How-to Series**

CD, Includes video of Janet Macunovich on Division; FineGardening.com

**Park's Success With Seeds**

Ann Reilly; Park Seed (o.o.p. - buy used!)

**The New Seed-Starters Handbook**

Nancy Bubel; Rodale Press Inc., publ.

**Seed Germination Theory and Practice**

Norman C. Deno, 139 Lenor Dr., State College PA 16801

**Plant Propagation: Principles and Practices**

H. T. Hartmann, D. E. Kester, F. T. Davies, R. L. Geneve; Simon & Schuster, publ.