

# Dividing Perennials



Most perennial plants will start as cute little plants for the first year, as they become established. Through the first winter, the plant works on their root systems to gain a foundation for the growth of the foliage, flowers and fruit of the following growing season. The second year, the perennial starts to flourish, followed by the third year of multiplication of itself. Usually by the fourth or fifth year, the plant needs to be divided into multiple new plants to refit the space.

Dividing perennials is best done **in the fall** so that the plant may work on its root system through the winter, and then perform well with its foliage and flowers through the warmer growing season.

When dividing perennials in **the spring**, the plant is putting its energy into all three stages of development of

1. Rebuilding its **roots** for stability and drawing water from the ground,
2. Growing **foliage** to generate food for the plant and
3. Producing **blossoms** to attract pollinators to be able to produce seeds for propagation.

When plants are divided in the spring, they will not be as vigorous the first year and when done late in the spring, may possibly sacrifice their blossoms in favor of survival.

When plants have **multiplied and become overgrown in their space**, they will be so crowded that the **competition for food and water** will prevent the plants from producing flowers in the lush display that was expected. By dividing the plants, not only will each plant be lusher and productive the following season, but the “leftover” plants can be planted elsewhere to enhance other sections of the landscape to repeat color and texture, or trade with your friends.

## The Process of Dividing Perennials:

It is best to **water the plants well before starting** to divide them. When the plants have sufficient water, they are more relaxed and less stressed through the division process; more water before means more success after and an easier process of dividing! The roots of the plants will relax and it will be easier to separate when they have been watered well before hand.

### Dividing:



**To begin the process of dividing**, I dig around the plant just beyond the *drip line* with a digging fork to loosen the roots and the soil. I circle the plant by pushing the fork down into the ground, with the fork facing the plant, and pulling back on the fork to start to raise the plant. As I go around the plant in this way, the plant starts to rise up and I can see where an underground problem may be before I start digging. A fork will loosen the roots and go around rocks. This allows a shovel to complete the uprooting of the plant without hurting the plant, or you getting frustrated by the rocks. Often I do not even need a shovel once the plant “clump” has risen up from the ground.

Dividing perennials is best done with **digging forks**, rather than shovels and saws. When using shoves, the root system is severely damaged and the plant will take more time and effort to recover their other functions. A digging fork will separate the roots of the plants from each other with minimum damage and will provide a quicker recovery and production from the plant, thus making a better show in the landscape. A digging fork will move **through** rocks and roots that would inhibit a shovel.

**Once the clump is up from the ground**, I use **two** digging forks to divide the clumps, by thrusting one fork into the center of the clump, then placing another fork “**back to back**” with the other fork and thrusting it into the clump as well, I then make a “V” of the two forks to wedge to two sections apart, then cross them the other way to make an “X” and back again to divide the clump into two.

I can then **repeat the process** with each half to continue to divide the plant to become the size I need. Extra plants can be put into a bucket of water for a day or so, to be potted in containers to wait for another “home” for it.

As I separate the plants from each other, I place them in a bucket of water to **protect them from shock** and prepare them better for transplanting into a

bed or a pot of soil. If this is not done and the plants go directly into the soil, they will wilt while trying to recover from their trauma of being uprooted and pulled apart from the other plants.

## **After dividing the plants:**

1. Water the transplants deeply at the time of planting
  - a. to help the roots to become established,
2. Then water every morning for a week,
3. For Spring transplanting water:
  - a. Three times a week the second week,
  - b. Twice the third week,
  - c. After that an inch a week of rain or watering will be sufficient.
  - d. Be careful of drought times ***the first year***
    - i. Water well, at least weekly, in the summer
4. The cooler weather of the fall and more frequent rain makes the long term watering of transplants unnecessary. Just the first week will be critical.

## **Potted stock:**

Keep *your potted stock* well watered and weed free as you wait to find the right place for them.

Spring and summer potted plants need to be watered frequently, or sink the pots into the ground for insulation of the roots and better growth.

If your potted stock is not planted in the ground in the fall:

1. Merge the containers in a common space,
  - a. In a sheltered place outside for the winter;
  - b. Near a building, or fence works well.
2. Cover the group of the plants with a thick pile of leaves for the winter
  - a. To provide insulation and nutrients through the cold months,
  - b. So they can build a solid root system and be ready for early spring planting.
3. Just remember to **uncover them in late February**
  - a. So they can “breathe” again and start growing their foliage.

## **In conclusion:**

By dividing the overgrown plants in your yard and landscape, you will have an abundance of plants to move into other areas of your yard and to share with your friends. By having the plants and colors repeat around your landscape among other plantings, you will develop continuity and fullness to your design to enjoy for a very long time.

Even the largest clump of hosta, Siberian iris and other tightly rooted perennial clumps will be easier to manage and enjoy once they are divided.

Late August through October is the best time to plan your dividing and transplanting. Late March through April is the second best. All other times require more watering before the transplant and after to prevent shock of the plants and provide the best performance in your gardens.

By planning ahead you will have less work and more enjoyment of your landscape. I hope you are able to relax and enjoy the natural world around you as you care for the land and enjoy the beauty of the gardens!