

YES, YOU CAN DIVIDE PERENNIALS NOW!

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Spring, and we're all eager to visit our favorite nurseries and start planting—vegetables, annuals, biennials, perennials. Unfortunately, in these months of restrictions due to COVID-19, you may find plant-shopping more complicated than in the past. As you probably already know, the Master Gardeners' annual April plant sale has been cancelled. However, many nurseries have on-line catalogs and will put together your order for curbside pick-up.

In the meantime, while you are pulling those early weeds, such as henbit, hairy bittercress, common chickweed, garlic mustard, and of course, dandelions, check your perennials and bulbs to determine whether they need dividing. Has the plant outgrown its space? Does it now produce few or no flowers? Does it get too much/not enough shade? Take a picture or put a plant marker by the clump. Then, when the bulb foliage browns or the perennial finishes blooming, you'll know which ones to divide.

Save money with perennials

Whether you are ordering from local nurseries or starting your own plants from seeds, consider replacing annuals, which die each year, with perennials, which live for at least several years. Although initially more expensive than annuals, perennials don't have to be replaced each spring, and every few years, most must be divided, creating more plants at no cost to you. And while most perennials have a limited bloom time, you can work around that by mixing together in the same bed, those with different bloom times, different colors, and contrasting foliage. For example, about the time our spring bulbs and perennials, such as bleeding hearts have finished blooming, peonies, cone flowers, coreopsis, and black-eyed Susans boldly step forward; and when even these tire in late August, chrysanthemums and asters begin to bloom.

Generally, gardeners are told to plant perennials in seasons opposite of when they'll bloom, i.e., plant spring-flowering perennials or bulbs in late summer or fall; plant in spring, those that will bloom in late summer or fall. However, rules are made to be broken. I have successfully divided clumps of crowded bulbs, which are producing lots of greenery but few flowers, in early spring or summer. Recently, I carefully dug up and transplanted some grape hyacinths and Shasta daisies, making sure the flowering stems and leaves stayed above ground and that they were replanted to the depth where they'd been before; so far, they seem happy in their new location. The UMD extension service recommends transplanting such perennials or bulbs on cloudy, cooler days to reduce stress from the sun or heat.

Most spring bulbs behave similarly to perennials—that is, the above-ground plant dies off, while the below-ground material (the bulb and its roots) remains alive. Differently from most perennials, however, the above-ground plant material from a bulb, such as a daffodil or hyacinth, dies off rather quickly once it has finished flowering. When the stem and leaves turn brown, you can trim them back to ground level or dig them up, keeping them refrigerated or in a cool place and replanting in late summer or early fall. Be sure to label daffodils, as people have sometimes eaten them, mistaking

them for onions. All parts of these plants and plant sap are toxic if ingested (nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, abdominal pain, irritation of mouth).

Mind the gap

When we trim back the bulb foliage, we sometimes find a new challenge: a big gap between the now-empty bulb bed and nearby plants. A simple solution: fill garden gaps with annuals. Impatiens do nicely in the shade and bloom until the first hard frost. Zinnias, verbena, petunias, vincas, and marigolds are happy in the sun. Check the University of Maryland website, <https://extension.umd.edu/hgic>, for more information on sun- and shade-loving annuals and perennials.

Some perennials, such as varieties of coreopsis, need to be dead-headed regularly to encourage additional blooms. Also, if you notice the plant seems to be getting leggy, but has lush growth at the base, you might want to trim back the old foliage, allowing the newer leaves and stems to develop. However, even when they've stopped blooming, the seedheads, especially of coneflowers, attract finches and other birds.

Oh, and while you're waiting for those new perennials and annuals to fill in the gaps, come on over to my place and pull a few weeds for me, will ya?

For more information about the Frederick County Master Gardener/Horticulture Program, visit: <http://extension.umd.edu/frederick-county/home-gardening> or call Susan Trice at the University of Maryland Extension Frederick County office, 301-600-1596.

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