

Dividing Herbaceous Perennials

Herbaceous perennials provide beautiful color and are easy to care for and to propagate. “Herbaceous perennial” means that these are non-woody plants whose tops die down each winter. The plants come back each year from their root system. They reproduce themselves either by sexual propagation as seeds or by asexual or vegetative propagation with runners, layering, or offshoots. Dividing an herbaceous perennial is a method of vegetative or asexual propagation that is an easy and quick way to produce new plants or reduce over-crowding.

Some popular herbaceous perennials that are easily divided, even while actively growing, include daylily, iris, hosta, black-eyed Susan, sedum, ginger, astilbe, bergenia, chrysanthemum, lily-of-the-valley, lirioppe, poppy, water lily, ornamental grass, and many others.

Perennials grow from a crown, tuber, or rhizome (i.e. iris). Whether they have a crown or a rhizome, they expand outward as they age. The centers often become empty, resulting in a “doughnut” of growth with nothing in the center of the plant except, maybe, weeds.

Herbaceous perennials grow at different rates. Some plants need dividing more often than others. On average, dividing every four years is recommended unless you want to reproduce more plants faster. A plant is shocked anytime it’s lifted from the ground and its roots and stems are cut. The plant’s growth cycle slows dramatically as it uses its strength to recover from the shock. An old saying goes, “After you divide a perennial, the first year it sleeps, the second it creeps, and the third year it leaps.” Application varies from species to species, but generally it is an accurate statement.

The ideal time to do a division is in the fall or early spring when the plant is dormant and less subject to shock. However, some very tough ones such as lirioppe,

hosta, and daylily will tolerate being divided even when actively growing. They will wilt and look rather beaten afterwards, but they will recover when properly cared for.

Preparing a New Home for the New Plants

When preparing a new site for your newly-divided plants, always take the time and effort to improve the soil by adding compost, peat moss, or composted horse or cow manure prior to planting. The time spent improving the soil will pay off in the long run by promoting good root growth. You’ll see the results in much healthier plants with vigorous flowering. Test your garden soil if you haven’t done so in the past three years. Instructions on having a soil test done by a lab are available on the HGIC website.

Making a Division

There are two ways that you can make a division. The traditional method is to dig the entire plant out of the soil, using a spading fork to save as many roots as possible. Then divide the crown into two, three, or more pieces using a large knife, a spade, or just your hands. An alternative method is to remove only a portion of the plant by slicing off a section without digging out the entire plant.

Replant the new divisions as soon as possible. Don’t leave them sitting in the sun for long, as they are very vulnerable to damage. If you cannot replant the divisions in a timely manner, place them in a bucket of water or temporarily plant them in mulch or compost. Large ornamental grasses can be very difficult to divide. Their crowns are tough and a spade or knife usually will not cut through them. Use an old pruning saw to cut each crown into sections.

Although propagating herbaceous perennials by division of the crown is very easy, it does not work for every type



Fig 1. Daylily plant to be divided



Fig 2. Dividing the daylily plant with a knife



Fig 3. Daylily plant divided



Fig 4. Separated daylily plants ready for replanting

of perennial. A few are very sensitive and may even die if divided.

Herbaceous perennials that should not be disturbed after their initial planting include:

- Baby's breath (*Gypsophila*)
- Foxglove (*Digitalis*)
- Gas Plant (*Dictamnus albus*)
- Butterfly Weed (*Asclepias spp.*)
- Lenten Rose (*Hellebores*)
- Coneflower (*Echinacea*)-Divided plants survive but produce very few flowers
- Statice (*Limonium*)
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Peonies can grow very nicely for many years without being divided. A symptom of overcrowding is a dramatic decrease in the size and amount of blossoms. When it is time to divide them, they are easily propagated by division of the crown. They should be divided while dormant in early spring or in early fall. If replanted too deeply they

will not flower properly. The recommendation is to plant them with the buds no more than two inches below the surface. Tree peonies are not divided.

Caring After Dividing

There is always some shock after a plant has been divided. It shows as temporary wilting and perhaps some dieback of stems, but it does recover. Dividing during dormancy will reduce shock symptoms. Damaged roots will regenerate faster with the proper care. Water a newly divided plant frequently for a few weeks, until it shows new growth. Mulch the plant to conserve soil moisture and keep the soil cool. Apply a general fertilizer or compost when the plant shows new growth to help it recover.

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