

# Perennials: Multiply By Dividing

By Aenne Carver

**PLANT TYPES TO DIVIDE:** Perennials are the backbone of a garden. The technical definition of a perennial is a plant that lives for more than two years. There are two main types of perennials, herbaceous perennials and woody perennials. Herbaceous perennials die-back during winter, but reappear with new shoots the following spring.



Herbaceous perennials gain vigor from being divided in the fall. Conversely, woody perennials, like shrubs, don't die back in the winter, but get bigger every year and don't need dividing. Many favorite flowers fall into the herbaceous perennial category, like Shasta daisies, and chrysanthemums. Surprisingly, bulbs, corms and tubers are also perennials, and thus benefit from division every couple of years.

**WHEN TO DIVIDE PERENNIALS:** When mature perennials appear crowded, bloom less abundantly, or sprawl and lose their shape, then it is time to divide them. Most herbaceous perennials die back during winter, and benefit from being divided every two to three years. This keeps the plant healthy, and a vigorous plant has more flowers and less pests and diseases.

**PREPARE THE PLANTS:** Water plants to be divided thoroughly a day or so before digging them up.

**DECIDE WHAT TO DO WITH THE DIVIDED PERENNIALS:** If you plan to share plants with friends, you will need pots and potting soil. On the other hand, if you intend to place divisions back into your garden, then prepare an area for them. Loosen the soil and mix in some compost, or aged manure along with a small amount of an organic fertilizer or slow-release chemical fertilizer.

**STEP ONE:** Prune the foliage of the plant down to about six inches above the ground. This eases the shock of being divided and reduces moisture loss. Petite perennials, like thyme, campanula, and lamb's ear don't need this step.



**STEP TWO:** Use a shovel or spading fork and dig down around all four sides of the plant. Scoop underneath and lift the clump to be divided, taking care to retrieve as many of the roots as possible. If the clump is heavy, save back strain by cutting the clump into several pieces before lifting it from the ground. Use a sharp shovel and put weight on it with your foot to cut through stout roots.

**STEP THREE:** Remove any excess soil clinging to the roots. This allows you to see where to make the divisions by aiming to have each section contain some roots and at least three stems or leaves. You may need a small saw, sharp pruners or a knife to divide thick clumps. Discard any parts of the plant that are diseased, bug-laden, or woody (old). Remove all dead leaves, and any parts that are weak.

As soon as possible, plant the divided portions, firm the soil around the roots to remove any air pockets, and water thoroughly.

**TYPES OF ROOTS:** Keep in mind perennials have different kinds of root systems which may require slightly different treatment. Some have clumping roots that form a large mass, like ornamental grasses. To divide clumping roots, cut through the entire mass even if you can't see where to make neat divisions. Simply try to cut the clump into three or four portions. Each section needs roots and a fan of leaves. Other perennials have roots that spread underground and these underground runners are often invasive. Lamb's ear, mint, and most asters have such root systems. Underground roots are easy to divide, just pull the runners apart with your hands, and plant sections of the roots.

**DIVIDING BULBS, CORMS, TUBERS & RHIZOMES:** Bulbs and other plants with underground storage organs are perennials, and many also benefit from being divided, like daylilies, and irises. Dig up the entire clump, and make sure each division has a baby bulb, corm, tuber or a sizable portion of a rhizome and at least three stems or leaves.

