



Garden Maintenance : Dividing and Transplanting Perennials

Most perennials won't need dividing more often than every 3-5 years, if that. A decrease in vigor, less flowering or a central bald spot are good indication that a plant will benefit from dividing and transplanting. Sometimes a plant will have outgrown its space and be ready for redistribution in your garden, leaving a smaller piece in the original spot. A large, healthy plant is also a candidate for dividing in order to share with a friend.

Although this is an optional step in the year-round cycle of gardening, we suggest early September as the optimal time to consider this task. This will provide a minimum of 4- 6 weeks of cooler temperatures and autumn rains for roots to begin to establish before the first frosts arrive.

With some exceptions, the RULE is to divide spring and summer bloomers in fall. It's best to wait until the next spring to divide the fall bloomers. Lists of Bowood's favorite plants and suggestions on how, when and how often they may be divided follows.

Here are the basic techniques for best outcomes:

Prepare

- Overcast days are best for this task and sufficiently moist (not wet!) soils make the job easier
- If it hasn't rained for a while, water your plants thoroughly the **day before**
- Prepare your chosen transplanting site ahead of time so the space is ready for the new divisions
- Tie back large or arching foliage that may obstruct your view, or cut it back by 50-75%
- Trimming may be postponed until after dividing and transplanting; evergreen foliage is usually not cut back

Lift

- Dig in a circle around the plant, following the drip line, straight down from the outermost leaves
- Lean back slightly on your spade with each cut
- Don't be concerned if you dig through some of the root mass
- After one circle around the plant, move your spade outwards a bit in your trench and dig another circle around, pushing the shovel a little further under, lifting the plant slightly
- With the third time around you should be able to gently lift the root mass; if not, dig a little deeper
- Shake off as much soil as possible, letting the soil fall back into the hole; you may wish to hose off the roots as well, in order to get a better view of their structure
- Lift the whole plant carefully to a tarp, trug or bucket to evaluate and divide

Assess

- Take some time to observe the root structure which will tell you the best way to separate the pieces
- Choose the least invasive method possible – prying apart by hand or with two garden forks
- Tougher roots may be snipped with pruners, cut apart with a sharp garden knife or straight-edged shovel or pried apart with two pitchforks – depending on the size and type of root system

Divide

- Using whatever tools work best for your plant, pry, pull, or cut apart the roots into sections
- Select the most vigorous pieces, preserving a section of healthy roots and a least one node of growth above
- Each piece should be *at most* 20-25% of the original plant and balanced, more or less, top and bottom
- Discard pieces without much top growth; older plants may yield many divisions but don't be afraid to discard some

Protect

- This is a provisional step if you are unable to replant your divisions right away
- Wrap or cover your divisions with a tarp or other material, keeping the roots damp
- They might also be potted up temporarily in some potting mix
- Keep these waiting plants in the shade, protected and moist

Transplant

- If you haven't already cut back the foliage, do it now – this will protect the roots and balance the growth
- You may have to make some adjustments in the size and number of the holes you have prepared at the new site
- Move the division to a hole wider than the root-spread of your plant division
- Spread the roots out horizontally and position the crown in the hole at the same depth it sat originally
- Mixing compost in with the native backfill, gently press the soil around the crown and water it in well
- Let the water seep in, making sure the crown doesn't sink below grade, and water again
- If the site is sunny, provide shelter for the plant for the rest of the day – a chair, small table, umbrella or old sheet

Water; Water Again

- Keep an eye on the new transplants just as you would for any newly installed plant
- Water every day at least for the first week and whenever it is hot and dry
- As temperatures cool, you may switch to watering every other day

The Six Types of Root Systems

Knowing the different types of root systems will help you decide how to divide your plant into sections to transplant:

- Clumping: pry or cut apart offsets, each containing ample roots and three or more growing points
- Surface Roots: cut between any of the aboveground runners and each division will have its own stems and roots
- Rhizomatic Running Roots: separate the sucker from the mother plant by cutting the connecting horizontal root
- Woody Crown: clumping woody stems grow in close proximity and may be gently teased or cut apart with their roots
- Tubers/Rhizomes: slice or pull apart; this category requires specific instructions, contact us for further instructions
- Taproots: slice down the length of the root, allowing at least one eye, some taproot and a few side roots

Bowood Plants That Respond Well to Dividing in Fall

Botanical Name	Common Name	Root System	Comments
<i>Ajuga</i>	Bugleweed	Surface Roots	Every 2-3 years; cut and replant outer pieces
<i>Alchemilla</i>	Lady's Mantle	Clumping	Every 6-10 years; cut crown with sharp knife
<i>Asarum</i>	Wild Ginger	Running Roots	Easily dig and split; keep well-watered
<i>Astilbe</i>	Astilbe	Woody Crown	Likes frequent division – every 2-3 years
<i>Brunnera</i>	Siberian Bugwort	Running Roots	Divide infrequently; transplant divisions deeply
<i>Coreopsis</i>	Tickseed	Running Roots	Likes frequent division – every 2-3 years
<i>Echinacea</i>	Coneflower	Clumping	Often reseeds; divide every 4-5 years

<i>Epimedium</i>	Barrenwort	Running Roots	Only after 6-10 years if ever
Ferns	Japanese Painted, etc	Clumping	Every 6-10 years only if new plants are desired
Ferns	Lady, Ostrich, etc	Running Roots	Divide as needed or desired, even annually
<i>Galium</i>	Sweet Woodruff	Surface Roots	Divide as needed or desired, even annually
<i>Gaura</i>	Wand Flower	Taproot	Every 6-10 years if center has died back
<i>Geranium</i>	Cranesbill	Surface Roots	Every 3-5 years; gently tease apart
<i>Geum</i>	Avens	Clumping	Likes frequent division – every 2-3 years
<i>Heuchera</i>	Coral Bells	Clumping	Every 2-3 years; roots will sprout from stems
<i>Kniphofia</i>	Red-Hot Poker	Running Roots	Every 6-10 years only if center has died back
<i>Ligularia</i>	Leopard Plant	Clumping	Only after 6-10 years
<i>Lobelia</i>	Cardinal Flower	Clumping	Every 3-5 years; discard weak central crown
<i>Lysimachia</i>	Creeping Jenny	Surface Roots	Divide as needed or desired, even annually
<i>Nepeta</i>	Catmint	Woody Crown	Every 3-5 years if necessary
<i>Phlox</i> spp.	Phlox	Woody Crown	Every 2-4 years; discard woody parts
<i>Polygonatum</i>	Solomon's Seal	Running Roots	Every 6-10 years if center has died back
<i>Pulmonaria</i>	Lungwort	Running Roots	Only after 6-10 years; water in well
<i>Salvia</i>	Woodland Sage	Woody Crown	Every 6-10 years if center has died back
<i>Sempervivum</i>	Hens 'n' Chicks	Surface Roots	Plant "chicks" after central rosette dies back
<i>Stachys</i> <i>byz</i>	Lamb's Ears	Clumping	Every 4-5 years; roots along stems
<i>Veronica</i>	Speedwell	Surface Roots	Every 3-5 years; easily sliced into pieces
<i>Vinca</i>	Periwinkle	Surface Roots	Divide as needed or desired, even annually
<i>Viola</i>	Violet	Running Roots	Divide as needed or desired, even annually

Plants That Should Wait Until Spring			
Botanical Name	Common Name	Root System	Comments
<i>Achillea</i>	Yarrow	Running Roots	Likes frequent division – every 2-3 years
<i>Armeria</i>	Sea Thrift	Clumping	Every 4-5 years, cutting into smaller pieces
<i>Artemisia</i>	Wormwood	Woody Crown	Every 2-3 years; discard weak central crown
<i>Bergenia</i>	Pig Squeak	Running Roots	Every 4-5 years; transplant divisions deeply
<i>Chelone</i>	Turtlehead	Running Roots	Every 4-5 years or as needed
<i>Delphinium</i>	Larkspur	Clumping	Every 2-3 years; fall division causes dieback
<i>Dianthus</i>	Pinks	Clumping	Likes frequent division – every 2-3 years
<i>Eupatorium</i>	Joe Pye Weed	Woody Crown	Likes frequent division – every 2-3 years
<i>Helleborus</i>	Lenten Rose	Clumping	Only after 6-10 years; divide after flowering
<i>Lamium</i>	Spotted Deadnettle	Surface Roots	Divide every 4-5 years
<i>Leucanthemum</i>	Daisy	Clumping	Likes frequent division – every 2-3 years
<i>Liatris</i>	Blazing Star	Clumping	Every 3-5 years; cut sections with sharp knife
<i>Mertensia</i>	Virginia Bluebell	Clumping	Divide every 4-5 years before foliage dies back
<i>Monarda</i>	Bee Balm	Running Roots	Every 2-3 years just as foliage is emerging
<i>Ornamental Grass</i>	Various	Clumping	Divide only when center has died back

<i>Pachysandra</i>	Japanese Spurge	Running Roots	Divide as needed or desired, even annually
<i>Penstemon</i>	Beardtongue	Clumping	Likes frequent division – every 2-3 years
<i>Polemonium</i>	Jacob's Ladder	Clumping	Every 6-10 years; tease divisions apart gently
<i>Rudbeckia</i>	Black-eyed Susan	Running Roots	Often reseeds; divide every 4-5 years
<i>Sedum</i>	Stonecrop/Sedum	Surface Roots	Divide gently by hand every 4-5 years
<i>Solidago</i>	Goldenrod	Running Roots	Divide every 4-5 years with pitchfork or spade
<i>Symphotrichum</i>	Aster	Woody Crown	Likes frequent division – every 2-3 years
<i>Thymus</i>	Thyme	Woody Crown	Every 4-5 years
<i>Tricyrtis</i>	Japanese Toad Lily	Running Roots	Only after 6-10 years

Exceptions to the Rule

Botanical Name	Common Name	Root System	Comments
<i>Dahlia</i>	Dahlia	Tuber	Dig and store bulbs after hard frost kills foliage
<i>Hemerocallis</i>	Daylily	Tuberous Rhizome	Divide right after flowering (June); 3-5 years
<i>Iris</i> hybrids	Bearded Iris	Rhizome	Every 2-3 years; 4-6 weeks after blooming
<i>Iris siberica</i>	Siberian Iris	Rhizome	Every 6-10 years; in late August

Avoid Dividing and Transplanting

Botanical Name	Common Name	Root System	Comments
<i>Anemone</i>	Japanese Anemone	Underground Runners	Mother plant does not like to be disturbed
<i>Aquilegia</i>	Columbine	Clumping	Dig deep to get all tapering, finger-like roots
<i>Aruncus</i>	Goatsbeard	Clumping	Deep rootstock; slow to recover after dividing
<i>Asclepias</i>	Milkweed	Taproot	Difficult to divide; deep, brittle taproot
<i>Baptisia</i>	False Indigo	Taproot	Difficult to re-establish due to deep taproots
<i>Clematis</i>	Clematis	Clumping	Does not respond well to division
<i>Dicentra</i>	Bleeding Heart	Clumping	Roots are brittle
<i>Digitalis</i>	Foxglove	Clumping Biennial	Allow to re-seed; transplant seedlings
<i>Euphorbia</i>	Spurge	Clumping	Rarely needs division; roots are brittle
<i>Gypsophila</i>	Baby's Breath	Taproot	Does not like to be disturbed
<i>Hibiscus</i>	Hardy Hibiscus	Woody Crown	Rarely, but in fall if transplanting is necessary
<i>Hosta</i>	Hosta	Clumping	Best left alone or divide only after 6-10 years
<i>Oenothera</i>	Evening Primrose	Taproot	Does not divide well; fleshy taproot
<i>Paeonia</i>	Peony	Clumping	Hates being disturbed; very slow to re-bloom
<i>Papaver</i>	Poppy	Taproot	Does not like to be disturbed; will re-seed
<i>Perovskia</i>	Russian Sage	Woody Crown	Does not like to be disturbed
<i>Pulsatilla</i>	Pasque Flower	Clumping	Fragile roots; does not like to be disturbed
<i>Scabiosa</i>	Pincushion Flower	Clumping	Re-establishes slowly after transplanting
<i>Thalictrum</i>	Meadow Rue	Clumping	Slow to recover after transplanting
<i>Trollius</i>	Globe Flower	Clumping	Slow to recover after transplanting