



## DIVIDING PERENNIALS

by PAT GEMEINHARDT  
Master Gardener



### **Cape Cod Cooperative Extension**

*Deeds & Probate Building*

*PO Box 367*

*Barnstable MA 02630-0367*

*(508) 375-6690*

Herbaceous perennials are plants that live in the garden from year to year. The tops usually die to the ground and emerge in the spring from buried roots.

**Why divide?** Dividing perennials maintains their vigor, rejuvenates older plants and is the easiest method of propagation.

**When does a plant need division?** If a plant is producing smaller or fewer flowers than normal, if the stems fall over easily, if the center of the clump is hollow and dead or the bottom foliage is sparse and poor, the plant will benefit from division. Plants such as peonies, iris, hostas and daylilies are among the most common garden perennials that are easily divided. Most perennials need to be divided every 3 to 4 years. A few do best undisturbed and should be left as long as possible. Tap rooted perennials are best propagated from seed as divisions are not feasible. These include butterfly weed (*Asclepias*), gas plants (*Dictamnus*) and rue (*Ruta*).

**Which season is best to divide?** Late summer or early autumn is the best time to divide spring and summer flowering perennials. They will have a long season to reestablish their roots and be ready to bloom again next year. Fall blooming perennials can be divided in late fall after blooming, or in spring to allow time for the plant to reestablish itself and set blooms for that year.

### **How do you divide a perennial?**

A good watering the day before dividing will help the plants withstand the shock of division.

1. Cut down old stems so that the crown can be seen. Cut back the foliage by one half to two-thirds. This helps the new plants by having less foliage to maintain with limited root mass. If done early in this process, it is easier to see where you are working.
2. Dig around and under the entire plant, lifting it carefully to avoid root damage. A garden fork is the best tool for this task.
3. Using a large sharp knife, pruners or a spade, cut the clump into smaller sections. If the clump is very large and tough, two garden forks can be inserted back to back into the center of the clump and used to lever the clump gently apart. Repeat as needed.
4. Gently pull the clump into smaller pieces. Discard the center of the clump if it is weak and woody. The rest is separated into clumps of 3 to 5 shoots each. Peonies should have at least three good growing points, which will be placed just below the soil surface. Divisions should not be very small unless a large number of plants are needed. Very small divisions should be potted or planted in a nursery bed for special attention until they reach flowering size again. They can then be planted in the normal garden bed.
5. Do not allow the divisions to dry out. Replant the divisions immediately in an area, which has been prepared by adding compost and bone meal. Plant at the same depth as before and water well. These divisions may need a little extra protection during the winter ahead.

Remember one of the delights of gardening is sharing any leftover divisions with fellow gardeners!

(over)

**Sources:**

*Rodale's Illustrated Encyclopedia of Perennials*, Ellen Phillips & C. Colston Burrell, 1993. Rodale Press, Inc., Emmaus, PA

*Perennials, How to Select, Grow & Enjoy*, Pamela Harper & Frederick McGourty, 1982, HPBooks, Los Angeles, CA

*The Illustrated Encyclopedia of Perennials*, Professor Marshall Craigmyle, 1999, Salamander Books Ltd., London.