

# Making More Perennials:

## A Guide to Simple Division

Patrick Lima

EACH PERENNIAL has its own pace and method of increase. But sooner or later, a gardener will either need or want to divide most of them. If necessity forces your hand—as bergamot roots run amok and iris rhizomes crawl over each other—division is taken on to restore health, order, and decorum to the garden. When a treasured slowpoke—a rare lungwort or that fern-leaf peony—grows big enough to be conjured from one into three, division is cause for excitement and hope.

Dividing any perennial bulkier than a primrose can be heavy, messy work. As a *laissez-faire*—and lazy fair-weather—kind of gardener, I like to be sure it's called for. When “spreadacious” plants such as yarrows, fall asters, and Japanese anemones soon creep out of bounds, division brings them back into line. In the opposite direction, favorite perennials are multiplied by division to be spread around the garden or shared with friends. Rejuvenation is the goal as older clumps of phlox, daisies, and daylilies are broken into smaller segments and replanted for a fresh start.

Perennials are occasionally divided while still in the ground; a sharp spade or trowel plunged deep into a clump and pried outward and upward will yield a spare piece or two, leaving the

rest in place. Typically, though, we lift an entire clump out of the ground—a back-taxing job when tackling peonies, daylilies, and Siberian irises—before starting to divide. That done, I like to shake off some soil, the better to see the separate crowns and natural dividing lines. At this stage, handy tools include pruning shears, a pocketknife, and a strong, sharp kitchen knife—I use a rusty old thing long past kitchen duty. Scissors make short work of gangly, fibrous roots.

There is no stereotyping perennials. Heleniums and primroses (to take a tall fall and a short spring example) are loosely woven together underground and practically fall into distinct segments as you lift them; fingers and a small knife sever remaining ties.

Aconites, shasta daisies, bearded irises, sundrops, heucheras, and clumps of daffodils and lilies also fit this pattern. In contrast, a decade-old peony root is a solid, woody mass with odd prongs and side roots attached; without a strong knife and good secateurs, you'll make little progress.

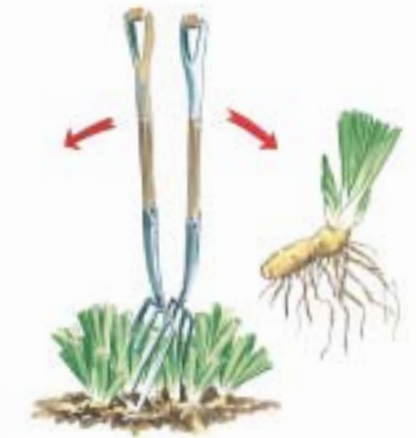
Siberian irises typify perennials that develop a dense tangle of roots, so tightly interwoven that you can only position a knife or thin-bladed pruning saw in a likely place between crowns and cut through until something



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Divide plants with fibrous roots, such as astilbe (left), with a knife. Those with bulkier, tuberous roots, such as iris, are best separated with two forks (right), then trimmed with a knife.



gives—like slicing an ossified fruitcake, according to one garden writer. A well-established daylily is easier to pull apart by hand once the first or second division has taken care of the tightly bound center. Two hand forks inserted back-to-back in the middle, and then levered outward, will often accomplish the first couple of splits. In sunny weather, it's a good idea to cover divisions with a damp blanket or soil, or plop them into a basin of muddy water to keep roots from drying out.

What we're after with all this cutting, tugging, and tearing is a number of smaller clones of the original. One to five crowns—leafy segments with a shock of roots attached—constitute a good division. If you are tempted to go for larger divisions in hopes of quicker returns, remember the fallacy of the big clump: Smaller divisions take hold faster and outpace larger ones. Segments from the outer edges of a clump are more vital than those from the worn-out middle.

A large clump may yield 10, 20, or more divisions, some better than others, as well as a pile of broken shoots, severed roots, and debris. Choose the number you need from among the best. Gardening friends may (or may not) appreciate the extras, and some can be potted for charity sales. The compost heap will recycle the rest.

It's best to replant divisions as soon as possible, preferably the same day. Use this opportunity to get some soil-improving, root-

feeding organic matter into the ground. Dig an oversized hole for each division and stir in a spadeful of fine-textured compost, old manure, leaf mold, a bit of peat, sand if the earth is heavy, and perhaps a palmful of natural fertilizer. Such amendments encourage new roots. Plant firmly, water deeply, and, as an old neighbor of ours said after watching us go to great lengths putting in a peony root, “If it doesn't grow, it's not your fault.”



### Timing

Many perennials respond to division either in early spring or in early fall. The following, however, are best split in late summer and fall:

**Alliums, crocuses, daffodils, grape hyacinths, and other spring-flowering bulbs:** Split crowded clumps in September before new roots form.

**Delphiniums:** Enrich soil, then replant firmly to avoid winter heaving.

**Doronicum, or leopard's bane:** Easily broken apart for more yellow “daisies” next spring.

**Lilies:** Divide large clumps into separate bulbs.

**Siberian irises:** Split when flowering diminishes; enrich earth well.

**Peonies:** A puzzle of a plant to divide; aim for 2-5 growing tips—clearly visible red nubs—per division. Be careful not to reset too deep.

**Oriental poppies:** Divide in August or early September, just as fresh growth appears.

**Primulas:** Early September is almost as good as late June; divisions re-establish quickly.

**Virginia bluebells:** Seldom need division but easy to work with.