

There are lots of reasons to divide the perennials in your garden. Among them are:

Keeping them healthy. Many perennials grow quickly, forming large clumps. If you don't divide them every three to four years, these clumps can die out in the middle, leaving a bare hole.

Overcrowded perennials are also more susceptible to attack from fungal diseases and insect infestations.

Keeping them beautiful. Overcrowded perennials often have fewer and/or smaller flowers than their well-spaced and divided counterparts. If your perennials are drastically in need of division, they may even appear stunted.

Keeping them in bounds. Some perennials (including gooseneck loosestrife, plume poppy, and obedient plant) are especially vigorous or even aggressive. Dividing these plants will help keep them from overwhelming their neighbors.

Making more plants. Dividing perennials leaves you with more plants of the same variety -- perfect for adding to other places in the garden or trading with friends, family, or neighbors.

When to Divide

While you can divide most perennials any time from spring to fall, those two seasons are best.

This is because dividing your perennials can be stressful on the plants -- and they'll recover better from the shock in cool, moist conditions. That said, if you want to divide your favorite perennials in summer, be sure to keep them well watered afterward. As far as your plants go, wait to divide them until they're large enough that you can make several clumps out of them.

How to Divide Clump-Forming Perennials

Step 1: Dig the Clump

Dig up the clump of perennials to be divided by inserting the shovel deep into the soil around the perimeter to loosen roots and isolate the clump. Here's a hint: Watering the perennial a couple of days before you dig it will soften the soil and save you effort.

Step 2: Remove the Clump

Force the shovel under the root ball and lever the ball up and down to loosen and position it on the shovel. Then lift the shovel and root ball. Try to keep the root system as intact as you can.

Step 3: Remove the Soil

Shake, wash, or brush the excess soil from the root ball. This will make it easier to pull the clump apart.

Step 4: Separate the Clumps

Pry or cut apart individual crowns. Each clump needs to have sets of leaves and roots in order to grow.

Step 5: Replant

Replant the divisions promptly so the roots don't dry out. Plant at the same depth as before and water well. Cover the soil with mulch.

Leave These Be

While most perennials benefit from being divided every few years, there are a few that don't. Avoid dividing these varieties:

Baptisia
Bleeding heart (Dicentra)
Butterfly weed (Asclepias)
Christmas rose (Helleborus)
Gas plant (Dictamnus)
Lavender (Lavandula)
Oriental poppy (Papaver orientale)
Peony (Paeonia)

Regular Dividers

Most perennials do best when divided every three to four years. These include:

Astilbe
Bee balm (Monarda)
Black-eyed Susan (Rudbeckia)
Daylily (Hemerocallis)
Hosta
Phlox
Purple coneflower (Echinacea)
Siberian iris (Iris sibirica)

Frequent Dividers

Divide these perennials every other or every third year to keep them performing at their best.

Aster
Blanket flower (Gaillardia)
Clustered bellflowers (Campanula)
Coreopsis
Lamb's ears (Stachys)
Yarrow (Achillea)