August 22, 2022

**Dividing Perennials**

"When gardeners garden, it is not just plants that grow, but the gardeners themselves."   
- Ken Druse.

Over the years, I’ve divided many of my plants and used them to increase the size of my gardens or shared them with family and friends. For some plants, division is necessary to get maximum blooms year after year. Knowing how to divide your plants take a little research and practice to ensure you’re going to get a division that will thrive once it's planted.

If you have an overgrown plant, determine when it prefers to be divided – spring or fall. Many plants can be divided in the spring but there quite a few that can be divided in the fall and some even prefer fall division. To help you determine when to divide certain perennials, visit <https://extension.umn.edu/planting-and-growing-guides/dividing-perennials>. Specific early fall examples include peonies, Oriental poppies, and Siberian iris. All plants should be divided when they are not blooming so it can focus its energy on growing new roots and leaves. Daylilies are a good example of a plant that does well being dividing just after they’ve bloomed.

Next figure out is what kind of root system it has. Some root systems are easier to divide than others. Plants such as *Hostas*, daylilies (*Hemerocallis* spp.), and lamb’s ears *(Stachy byzantine)* grow in “clumps” with fibrous root systems. New plants grown around the base of the original plant, each growing its own set of roots. These are some of the easier plants to divide. Simply dig up a clump and tease or tug apart clumps for new divisions.

Plants with runners and thin rhizomes and/or stolons are also easy to divide. Some examples include bee balm *(Monarda)*, aromatic aster *(Symphyotrichum oblongifolium)*, and goldenrod (*Solidago* spp.). Dig up the plant and split off rhizomes into smaller sections, ensuring each section has at least a couple growth tips. If need be, use a sharp pruner to separate shoots or clusters.

Plants with woody crowns are a little more difficult to divide. Examples include baptisia (*Baptisia* spp.)bluestar (*Amsonia* spp.)*,* and peonies *Paeonia* spp.). The buds are more tightly packed into a hardened crown, making them harder to divide. To be successful, only divide when the plant is large enough that it could be divided into three or four pieces. Peonies do not like to be disturbed and it’s recommended to rarely divide them. If you do, divide them in early fall and be careful not to plant too deep as it will diminish flowering.

Plants with single tap roots are fairly difficult to divide. Examples include Russian sage (*Perovskia atriplicifolia*), butterfly weed (*Ascelipias tuberosa*), and ballon flower (*Platcodon grandifloras*). All of these do not like to be disturbed and it’s recommended to not divide them often. Try to locate an offshoot near the crown or select young seedlings of taproot plants instead disturbing the original plant.

After you’ve finished dividing, you will need to replant your perennial and its divisions. Make sure the hole is wide enough as roots want to grow out and down. Firm up the soil so it’s in good contact with the root system so the new root hairs will hit soil and water when they start to grow. Water in the plant slowing and thoroughly. Finally, avoid feeding the plant and divisions. Follow these simple guidelines and you should have very happy division for your gardens and to share with others.

This week’s article is written by Jeannie Manis, a Wisconsin Certified Sauk County Master Gardener Volunteer.If you have any gardening questions, please contact the Extension Sauk County by emailing to [trripp@wisc.edu](mailto:trripp@wisc.edu) or calling the University of Wisconsin Madison Division of Extension Sauk County office at 608-355-3250.