

# Massachusetts Master Gardener Association

## FACT SHEET

**Have gardening questions?** Contact the **Master Gardener Help Line.**

At *Mass Hort, Wellesley*: [mghelpline@masshort.org](mailto:mghelpline@masshort.org), 617-933-4929

At *Tower Hill Botanic Garden, Boylston*: [hortline@towerhillbg.org](mailto:hortline@towerhillbg.org), 608-869-6111 x104

Please visit our website for Help Line hours: <http://massmastergardeners.org/what-i-do/>



## DIVIDING PERENNIALS

A few years after being planted, many perennials start to produce fewer or smaller blooms, develop a “bald spot” at the center of their crown, or grow too large crowding out neighbors. These are signs that it is time to divide. Division will rejuvenate the plant and stimulate new growth. The divisions can be transplanted in your own garden or shared with fellow gardeners.

Traditionally, spring and summer blooming perennials are divided in the fall, and those that bloom in the fall are divided in the spring. This allows the plant to use its growth period for foliage and root production. Many perennials can be divided at any time of the year when the soil is workable and after they have bloomed, but sufficient care should be given both before and after they are divided.

Divide perennials in the spring when the new growth is just starting and the soil structure is not too wet. The soil should crumble like chocolate cake if you take a handful, squeeze it into a ball, and drop it. If it stays in a ball, the soil is too wet. Divide perennials in the fall after the plant has bloomed and at least four to six weeks before the ground freezes.

The day before you plan to divide the perennial, water the soil if it is dry, cut the foliage back to about six inches and prepare the transplant site(s).

When possible, divide perennials on overcast days. Sunny or windy days can quickly dry out the exposed roots. Dig all the way around the parent plant using a spade or fork about 8-12” from the

crown. Gently lift the plant out of the ground and remove any loose dirt around the roots with a gentle spray of water. Keep the roots shaded and moist.

If the plant is shallowly rooted with a wide, fibrous root system (such as perennial geraniums) the shoots can usually be pulled apart by hand or by using two back-to-back spading forks. If the root system is compact, fleshy, and thick, such as grasses, use a spade or garden knife to cut the crown into pieces that each have a few buds. If it is fleshy and thick, but spreads out from the original plant (such as hostas) use a sharp knife to create individual fans with a few buds on each. If the center of the clump has started to die out (common with irises) discard the center and divide the new growth around the edges for transplanting.

Plant the divisions as soon as possible, placing each in a hole twice as wide as the root ball. Mix compost into the planting hole, adding low nitrogen fertilizer, which encourages root growth. Plant the crown slightly higher than the original soil line, and backfill. Firm the soil and water well, making sure there are no air pockets. The division should now be at the original soil line. If you have room and want a fuller appearance, plant the new divisions in clusters.

Water the new plants well for the next couple of weeks, and regularly during the growing season. Add a couple of inches of mulch to retain moisture during the summer and reduce the possibility of heaving during winter thaws. Always keep mulch away from the crown of the plant.

*The Massachusetts Master Gardener Association is a non-profit organization whose mission is to share knowledge and experience with the public through outreach programs in education, horticulture and gardening; to provide the Master Gardener Training Program to interested members of the public; and to provide graduates of the Master Gardener Training Program with educational and practical opportunities to extend their knowledge and interests in gardening and related topics.*

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