

Divide and Conquer Overgrown Perennials (published 2026-10-24)

By Kate O'Lenic, Master Gardener

I love perennials. And they love my gardens. They grow so well that they outgrow their spaces. Luckily, many perennials can be divided and transplanted. That's one way my gardens keep expanding. And who doesn't love free plants? It's also very good for the plants to be divided. It perks them up and encourages new growth. When a plant starts crowding the garden bed, it and its neighbors can suffer from competition for water and nutrients. You could end up with weak or diseased plants, or worse, dead plants. Before that happens, divide and conquer.

What to divide

Plants with spreading root systems that take well to being divided include coreopsis, asters, beebalm, and purple coneflower. Since their roots tend to be matted together, you'll need cut through them with a knife. For larger plants, insert 2 tools (shovels or garden forks) into the root ball and pull them apart. Each new clump should have 3 to 5 healthy shoots.

Clumping root plants are also good candidates. Examples are some ornamental grasses, astilbe, daylily, and hostas. The crown can be cut with a knife or pried apart with forks. Make sure the new pieces have at least one growing point bud. More buds will grow a larger plant.

Plants that spread by runners and rhizomes can also be easily divided. Strawberries and bearded irises fall into this category. These are really easy to divide. Cut the runner/rhizome with a knife and make sure the cut section has several inches and some leaves attached.

What NOT to divide

There are perennials that can't or shouldn't be divided. Plants with single deep taproots like butterfly weed should be left alone. Plants with woody bases, like lavender and Russian sage, resent attempts to break them apart. Columbine, clematis, false blue indigo, and lupine won't handle division either. I tried digging false blue indigo roots out. There was no way those monstrous roots were budging.

When to divide

A general rule of thumb is plants that flower in the spring should be divided in the fall; plants that flower in the fall should be divided in the spring. Pretty easy. But (there's always a "but") what about those plants that flower all summer? Good question. Those can be divided either in spring before they grow too big or in fall when they finally finish their show. Choose a cloudy day to dig up and divide plants. It's more comfortable for you and the plants. It will be easier to dig if you've had rain a day or so before digging. You could also water the area the day before, too.

Best divided in spring: Asters, astilbe, mums, ferns, back-eyed Susan, beebalm, bleeding heart, lenten rose, blazing star (Liatris), Virginia bluebells (after they bloom), yarrow.

Divide in fall: jack-in-the-pulpit, allium, phlox, daylily, cranesbill, coneflower.

You'll see that in the resources provided at the end of this article that advice about dividing plants varies. If you choose spring as your time to divide and conquer, do so when the plants are small and before buds form. If you want to wait for fall, let the flowers finish. The plants will establish healthy root systems at either time. In the fall, give them enough time to settle into their new home before a hard frost hits. Midsummer, however, is the worst time. It's too hot and plants will become very stressed if moved.

Take a look at your gardens to see which plants are ready for a pick-me-up by being divided. At the same time, check out where your new, free plants can go. A landscape full of plants is much prettier and beneficial to our pollinator friends than lawns. Enjoy!

Resources

"How and when to divide perennials," <https://extension.umn.edu/garden-and-home/yard-and-garden/gardening-in-minnesota/dividing-perennials#sources-1620660>

"A Guide to Dividing Perennials," <https://extension.psu.edu/a-guide-to-dividing-perennials>

"Dividing Perennials," <https://extension.psu.edu/programs/master-gardener/counties/chester/how-to-gardening-brochures/dividing-perennials-1>

"Dividing Perennials," <https://hgic.clemson.edu/factsheet/dividing-perennials/>

How do I ask a question?

If you have questions for the Master Gardeners, submit them to us on our website at www.netmga.net. Click the link at the top of the page, "ASK A MASTER GARDENER" to send in your question. Questions that are not answered in this column will receive a response from a Master Gardener to the contact information you provide.

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