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2001

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Recommended Citation
Hinkamp, Dennis, "Divide and Conquer Perennials" (2001). *All Archived Publications.* Paper 947.
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GARDEN NOTES

DIVIDE AND CONQUER PERENNIALS

By Dennis Hinkamp

September 2001 Fall-34

Perennials have a way of fattening up if left in their beds too long -- just like people.

"Plump plants just need to be trimmed or divided," says Jerry Goodspeed, Utah State University Extension horticulturist. "Many perennials can and should be divided on a regular basis. Division is a form of propagating a plant. As perennials grow, many produce more crowns or increase the number of shoots coming out of the ground. This is both good and bad, and can even be ugly at times."

The good side is that when plants grow width-wise they fill in large vacant areas, he says. Another good thing is that they get big enough to be divided into smaller plants that can then be relocated to fill in other parts of the garden.

The bad side of increased girth of plants is having to divide them on a regular basis to keep them healthy and happy. The truly ugly side to this situation is what happens when you decide not to divide. Once a plant gets so big, it begins to compete with itself for water, light and nutrients. This normally causes the center of these portentous perennials to die, making them look even worse than they did before.

Although fall is a good time to divide perennials, it is not the best time for all of them, Goodspeed says. As a rule of thumb, the best time to separate perennials can be calculated by the "60-day minimum" rule. This means that most perennials can be divided, moved or separated at least 60 days *after* they bloom. For example, if a plant blooms in the early spring, it can be divided in mid-to late-summer. However, it is a good idea to wait until the weather starts to cool before ripping them apart.

The 60-day rule also works for fall blooming perennials, but use a little common sense, he says. If a perennial blooms in the fall, 60-days later occurs in the middle of the winter. If the 60 days after bloom falls in the middle of a snow storm, wait until the weather warms enough to melt the snow before dividing your perennials -- preferably early in the spring.

Dividing and transplanting in the early fall, allows the new, young plants to have time to recover, and begin to grow new roots before the ground freezes, he says. Dividing in early spring also allows the plants to start growing before the weather turns hot.

“Any plant that creates a large clump can easily be divided, but you have to be tough or a little calloused,” Goodspeed says. “First, dig the whole clump out of the ground. Then, divide it by placing two garden forks in the middle of the clump, pry it apart, and split it into two pieces.”

If you don’t have two garden forks, a shovel can be used to slice the clump in half. Some perennials are so tough they have to be sawed in half with a chain saw, although a chain saw is normally not required.”

Once the clump is in two pieces, if it is big enough, it can be divided even further, he says. Keep at least two shoots, or growing stems, per clump to insure a good start for the new plant. Next, take the new, smaller clumps and plant them back into the ground. Be sure to keep same soil level as it was on the original larger clump. Planting them too deep can cause root rot and other problems.

Once they are planted securely in the ground, cut any top growth back to two to four inches high and water them well to get them growing, he adds. Be sure not to over-water, since cooler fall temperatures mean not as much water is needed. Another advantage of dividing in the fall is that cooler weather allows the roots to dedicate more energy to growth.

Dividing plants can create a problem commonly known as “The Zucchini Dilemma,” Goodspeed says. What do you do with the extras? It is hard for some people to throw anything away, especially if it has taken some effort to grow and raise. However, chucking them in the garbage can is a viable option. Some plants can also be moved into less populated areas or even given away to unsuspecting neighbors.

For more information, contact your local USU County Extension office.

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Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, Acts of May 9 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Robert L. Gilliland, Vice-President and Director, Cooperative Extension Service, Utah State University, Logan, Utah. (EP/09/2001/DF)