

SMARTGARDEN™ — Dividing Perennials

Knowing how to manage plant growth is key to having a successful garden.

Herbaceous perennials provide a dynamic aspect to any border. These are plants that contribute a seasonal show—producing foliage and flowers, then dying to the ground at the end of the growing season. Their roots or storage organs survive underground to grow again the following year. They not only change a garden's appearance from one season to the next, but over the years, they can spread a considerable distance to cover large areas, filling in empty spaces, or increasing in size to become a major presence.

Perennials can impart a sense of fullness and maturity to a bed, but they can also create problems when they outgrow their space. When perennials spread beyond the area desired and encroach on other plants, the garden may appear unkempt. Overcrowded plantings are also more prone to disease problems. Unless additional space is provided, the size of the plant must be reduced. Also, some perennials thrive for a time, but after several years become crowded and lose vigor or fail to bloom. In either case, it is time to consider dividing the plant. Dividing perennials renews their vigor, limits their size, and provides additional plants to expand your gardens or share with friends. (To see the process and the results that renovating—digging, dividing, and replanting—perennials has on the appearance of a large-scale perennial planting, see “Renovating a Perennial Border,” page 40.)

AGGRESSIVE SPREADERS

Perennials with a spreading growth habit, like bee balm (*Monarda didyma*), lemon balm (*Melissa officinalis*), creeping phlox (*Phlox subulata*), and gooseneck loosestrife (*Lysimachia clethroides*) often colonize areas where less aggressive plants are growing. If the assertive spreader is not restrained, its shy neighbors may be overcome and lost. Controlling aggressive plants by occasionally cutting, pulling, or digging out errant shoots may be needed. When a spreading

perennial becomes more trouble than its maintenance warrants, consider removing it from the garden to a spot where its vigor is not a problem.

Another way to limit growth of a spreading perennial is to contain the roots: Cut the bottom out of a large plastic pot and sink it into the ground where you want the plant to grow. Allow the lip of the pot to extend to the soil line. Plant the perennial in soil in the pot. The spread of roots and underground shoots is largely limited by the sides of the pot. The occasional shoot that escapes is easily removed.

EVER-EXPANDING CLUMPS

Clump-forming perennials spread in a more controlled manner—the clump simply increases in size in an ever-expanding circle from one season to the next. Perennial salvia (*Salvia xsuperba*), Siberian iris (*Iris siberica*), blue oat grass (*Helictotrichon sempervirens*), and hosta (*Hosta* spp.) are examples of perennials that display this type of growth habit. Sometimes a plant may grow too large for its space, but even with adequate space, some clump-forming perennials eventually lose their vigor and begin to decline in the center. Usually the areas at the edges of the clump remain vigorous, forming a ring of growth around a dead core.

When a clump has overgrown its space or has lost vigor, it needs to be divided. The exact timing depends primarily on the plant's season of bloom. Generally, spring- and summer-flowering perennials should be divided from late summer to fall; fall-flowering perennials in the spring. This provides the plant with a maximum amount of time to recover and grow vegetatively before it flowers again. Avoid dividing perennials in the heat of the summer, and if dividing in the fall, be sure to allow sufficient time for the roots to become reestablished before the ground freezes.



The first step in dividing a perennial is to dig out the entire clump with a spade. Lift the clump out of the hole and set it on its side.



Large, tangled roots need to be cut into several sections with a sharp knife or spade. Discard unhealthy or weak portions.



To reduce transplant stress, trim broken roots and cut back the stems of your new plants prior to planting the divisions.



Replant the divisions, setting them no deeper than they were growing. Firm the soil around the roots to remove air pockets and water well.

How you divide the clump is largely determined by the size and strength of the root system. Fibrous, shallow-rooted plants such as primroses and catmint can usually be divided by using your fingers to ease the clump into three or four smaller pieces. Perennials with a tangled or massive root system like daylilies and hostas may require cutting with a sharp knife or spade, or pulling sections apart with a pair of spading forks.

DIVIDING A CLUMP

Although there are a few exceptions, the procedure for dividing most perennials is the same. First, dig the entire clump and lift it out of the space where it is growing. Take this opportunity to loosen the soil in the growing area with a digging fork and amend it with organic matter such as compost, leaf mold, or well-rotted manure. It may be several years before you work the soil again.

If the center of the clump appears withered or dead, discard that portion, and plant only the more vigorous sections from the outside of the clump. Place each division into a prepared hole, gently spreading the roots. Fill the hole with amended soil, making sure the plant is growing at the same level it was growing before you dug it. Water thoroughly, and continue to water regularly until each new plant is established.

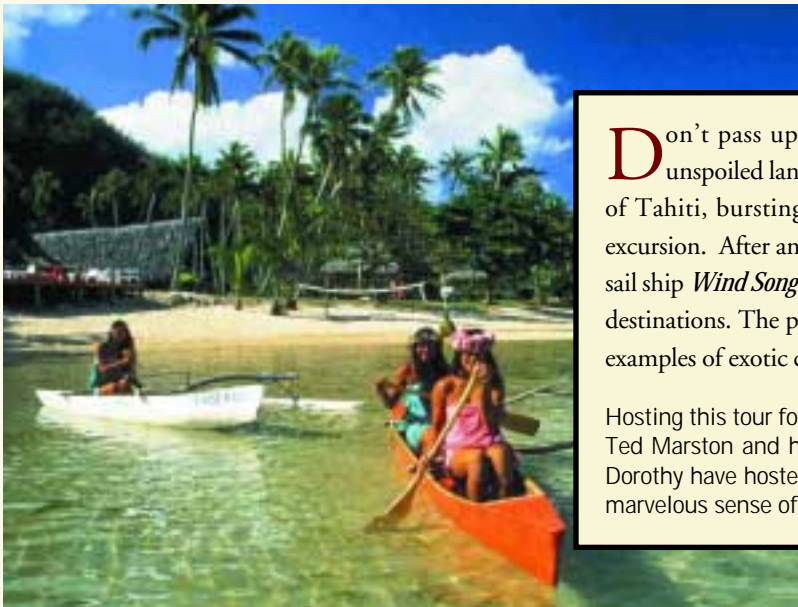
Rita Pelczar, Associate Editor



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