

Slug: Ask the Master Gardener
Date: Sept 24, 2006
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Fall is fast approaching and for some of us, our gardening enthusiasm is leaving just as rapidly, but now is the time to divide and propagate our abundance of perennials. If you do not want more plants for your own garden, remember that dividing some perennials is necessary for successful flowering next season. In addition, these plant starts make excellent presents for the coming holiday season. Use attractive small pots and keep the new starts in a sheltered area through the next fall months.

The simplest form of division is used with clump forming plants, such as perennial Geranium, or Aster. There are five basic steps to this successful division. Loosen the soil around the parent plant and lift it from the ground, shaking enough soil from the roots so you can tell where to divide the plant. If the soil is extremely dry, as is the case now, dunk the plant into a bucket of water or use the hose to expose the roots. If the root ball is very dense and tangled, use the two-fork technique. Lay the clump of roots and woody material on the ground and insert two spading forks back to back in the middle of the ball, pressing the handles toward each other. This will lever the clump apart. You can then divide these clumps by using a clean knife rather than a spade, especially if there is a fungal problem. Try to include at least half a dozen roots in each start. Dust the cuttings with sulfur or a fungicide and place each one in its own pot or newly dug hole. If you are transferring the new starts to another part of the garden, dig the bed and water the new plants in. Remember that some plants may have specific requirements during this procedure. For instance, day lilies must have at least 6 weeks to establish the root system before the ground freezes.

Another type of perennial division is used with rhizomatous perennials, such as Bearded Irises. To begin this division, again lift entire rhizome clump and shake off any surplus soil. With these plants, it is best to divide the sections by hand. Select nice young rhizomes with healthy roots and discard the old rhizomes onto the compost pile. Take the selected sections and cut them into 2-4 inch lengths with a sharp knife. Trim the fibrous roots by one third and transfer them to their final growing place. If you are putting them directly into the soil, trim the leaves to about 6 inches to reduce wind loosening while in the soil.

Try to plant the new divisions as soon as possible; they are vulnerable to drying out if left in the sun. Plant each new plant approximately one-half inch higher than the original plant, as they will sink as the soil settles and you would like them to end up at the same level as the original plant. Feed the new starts with foliar feed such as liquid seaweed or fish emulsion to provide trace elements to speed establishment. It is also a good idea to mulch the new starts heavily the first year to prevent shallow freezing and frost heaving.

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This column is written by Washington State University/Skagit County certified Master Gardeners. Questions may be submitted to WSU/Skagit County Cooperative Extension, 306 S. First Street, Mount Vernon, WA 98273-3805.

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