

Divide perennials for bright color

If some of your customers' perennial beds weren't as showy as usual in 1997, it may be time to dig, divide and replant.

By H. S. STEVENS

Once perennial plants are in the ground, they continue to spread and grow larger each year. As they spread, the plants located in the center of the bed begin to suffer from overcrowding, or from having exhausted the mineral content in the nearby soil. As a result, the flowers, especially those in the center of the plants, become fewer and smaller. The plants no longer have the vigor to produce large, showy blossoms.

Besides rejuvenating tired plants, there are two other good reasons to divide clumps of perennials. In some cases, they may have outgrown their space and are crowding other nearby plants.

Perennials are divided in spring or fall, depending on when they bloom. Fall blooming plants are divided in the spring; spring bloomers are divided in the fall. Daisies, daffodils, iris, daylilies, coreopsis, purple coneflowers and blanket flowers (*Gaillardia*) are among those that should be divided in the fall.

—H.S. Stevens writes for LM from Lancaster, Texas.



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Field guide: dividing perennials

1) Water the bed (or ask your customer to do so) a few days before you plan to dig so the soil will be moist; not too wet and not too dry.

2) If you will be planting some of the divisions in a separate bed, prepare the bed ahead of time. Add organic matter to the soil and remember that perennials need good drainage. Don't put them in a low area of the landscape and, if necessary to insure good drainage, plant in raised beds.

3) Before digging bulbs or rhizomatous plants, clip the foliage back to a height of six to nine inches with sharp pruning shears or scissors.

4) If the plant is healthy and you just want to have more of it, you can remove the outer sections with a sharp spade or knife. Before cutting, loosen the soil around the sections to be removed. Be sure you get roots and growth buds on each section.

To dig up the entire clump, loosen the soil around and under it with a garden fork and then gently lift it out.

Next, remove or trim

damaged or dead areas, including roots. If the center of the clump has stopped blooming, cut it away and discard it.

5) Rhizomatous plants should be cut in sections with a sharp knife. If clumps of other type plants are small, the sections can usually be pulled apart by hand. Separate large clumps with a sharp spade or garden fork. If you have a large clump with matted roots, use two garden forks. Hold them back to back with the tines touching and push them down into the clump. Now push the two handles together. The extra leverage you obtain will make separation easier. Regardless of the method used, be sure that you get roots as well as tops.

6) Don't over-divide. If you make the clumps too small, they will not provide much color during the next season. Some species of plants are programmed to reach a certain size before they bloom.

7) Replant the divisions as quickly as possible so they do not dry out. If you have more than you can replant in the available space on site, pot the spares to use later in another location.

8) Before any divisions are returned to the hole, improve the soil by adding organic matter and a little balanced granular fertilizer.

9) Immediately after planting, water thoroughly to settle the soil in around the roots. Water again only when the top inch or two of soil has dried.

H.S.S.

