



Redding Garden Club Garden Tips

Dividing Perennials

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One of the many miracles of gardening is the fact that dividing your plants actually multiplies them. Now, that's my kind of math!

Many perennials lose vigor after 3 to 5 years and will be re-energized by being divided. Check for plants that are developing a hole at the center; this is sign that division is needed. Other plants simply look too congested or may have visible offshoots attached to their original crown.

A rule of thumb is to divide spring blooming plants in Fall, and late bloomers in Spring. Plants that are better divided in Spring include hostas, ferns and grasses, because they are smaller and easier to handle then. And Sydney Eddison says that Daylilies (Hemerocallis) are better divided in Spring. In my experience, most perennials are forgiving if they are kept moist while reestablishing.

September ushers in the moderate weather that is suitable for dividing and transplanting many plants. Fleshy rooted perennials—e.g., peonies, irises, poppies—are best divided now so they will have time to develop new roots before the ground freezes. Use a transplant spade or pitchfork to loosen soil around the plant and lift it out of the ground. Shake the soil off so you can see the roots and nodes or eyes of new growth. You will often find naturally occurring separations that are easy to pull or tease apart with your hands. You can use a straight-edged spade or soil knife to cut the plant crown into sections, each with its own roots and at least 2 growth buds. For dense, fibrous or woody roots, try inserting two garden forks back to back and wiggling them apart to separate divisions. (I love the soil knife purchased from RGC for cutting through tough crowns and roots.)

Remove and discard any dry, old plant material and trim back the foliage. Use this opportunity to enrich the soil with compost before putting in your new plants. Peonies and irises do not like being buried too deep. The red "eyes" of the peony should be just an inch or so beneath the surface, and iris rhizomes like to peek above the soil. (Peonies and Hellebores can take two or more years to re-establish after dividing.)

Be sure to water your new divisions well and keep them moist until they go dormant. Next year, rejoice in the abundance you have created—and perhaps share it in the form of donations to the Plant Sale.