



Horticulture Notes: Divide and Conquer

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The plant sale is in a few weeks, yet. So before you dig, here are some suggestions to ward off the stress plants feel when dug from the earth, chopped into pieces, and plopped into containers into which soil is stuffed to keep the entire contents from shifting. How dreadful we can be to these little critters!

DIGGING

Disturbing the roots of any plant always causes stress. More stress means more loss of life so we want to minimize as much of it as we can. To do that, focus on root preservation, water, and shade. To begin:

- Identify the plants you want to dig. Maybe use a marker or label of some sort to do this.
- Water them thoroughly and let the roots suck in the moisture until tomorrow.
- The next day, insert your spade vertically, 8" deep around the plant, in as wide an arc as possible. You don't want to trim the roots of a neighboring plant but still, the plant you are about to dig needs the most roots possible to heal and live. So you decide how wide this circle is depending on the close proximity or overcrowding in your garden.
- Re-insert your spade all around the plant again with a rocking motion to loosen the soil and roots underneath. Remember that perennials usually grow roots to a depth of 8". There are exceptions of course....

Now you have three options: Plant the specimen in a prepared hole, plant it in a pot, or divide and plant in a hole or pot.

Prepare the hole: Dig the hole wide and deep enough for this plant, reserving the soil for later. Place 2" of compost into the hole and mix it into the soil along the sides and bottom of the hole. Fill the hole with water and let it drain. Place the plant into the hole; the soil level where the plant emerges from its original soil should be even with the soil line of the garden. If too shallow, remove the plant and some soil; if too deep, add more soil; and replace the plant. Fill spaces around the plant with additional soil and tamp lightly. With the excavated soil, encircle the plant's drip line with a dirt barrier in order to hold water for the roots. Water thoroughly. Protect from hot sun for a couple weeks. Check daily for wilting or other distress. A plant under stress is considerably more susceptible to pest infestations so check under its leaves, also. Gradually move the plant into the sun but continue to watch it for wilting and disease.

Prepare the pot: Line the pot with a few dead leaves so that water will trickle rather than pour from the container and the soil will stay put. Add soil amended with compost

to the bottom of the pot. The amount you add depends on the size of the transplant and the size of the pot. Usually a couple inches is preferred. Add the plant and fill around the sides with additional soil. Uncovered roots are like a paper cut, the root cells sting and die when exposed to the air. Water thoroughly, place in the shade for a couple weeks [or less if you have to bring those plants to market!], and check daily. Gradually move the plant into the sun but continue to watch it for wilting and disease.



Dividing

Once the plant has been lifted from the soil, place it on a flat surface. A sharpened spade is essential to reduce plant stress. Insert the spade vertically to cut the plant in as many sections as you want. Each section must have adequate roots if the plant is to survive. Place each division in enough water to reach the soil line of the division. Follow the above ideas to pot or transplant.

Here are a few notions about when to divide.

Rule of thumb #1: Divide spring blooming plants in the fall and fall blooming plants in the spring. This prevents damage to the future buds and allows plenty of time for the severed roots to regenerate before the plant requires lots of water for growth and bloom.

Some examples for spring division include Achilla, Amsonia, J. Anemone, Asters, Boltonia, Campanula, Shasta daisy, Veronica, etc.

Some examples for fall division include Allium, Chrysanthemums, Monkshood, Filipendula, Helianthus, etc.

Rule of thumb #2: Some species don't care when you divide them but certainly not when heavy with buds. These include Amsonia, Anemone, Marguerite, European ginger, Astilbe, Epimedium, Joe Pye Weed, Helenium, Heurchera, Hosta, etc.

Rule of thumb #3: When the crown of the plant protrudes through the spring soil, if the center looks dead or absent, and all you have is a ring, the plant is beseeching you to divide it. Some examples include Artemesia, Shasta daisy, Iris, etc.

Rule of thumb #4: Most perennials require division every three years to keep the plant strong and healthy.

Have a question or a comment? Contact Sandra