

Dividing herbaceous perennials

Have a look round the herbaceous bed while perennials are still fully visible, and decide which ones have spread too widely and whether the centre of a clump is short on flowering spikes and becoming less vigorous. You'll then see which plants to divide in the autumn.

Often, as a perennial spreads, you'll find that the new outer growth is much stronger and it makes sense to replace the old dead centre of a clump of delphiniums, asters or herbaceous campanulas with a younger, fresher piece from the perimeter. Not only that, but, after chucking the old parts, you'll end up with several perfectly healthy specimens for yourself or a lucky friend. And all for free.

You can divide perennials at almost any time after flowering. Choose a spell when the soil is dry and preferably not too cold. Avoid wet or very cold conditions as this will damage or rot the crowns. By dividing in the autumn you give a plant's roots a chance to put on a little growth; if you wait till winter, when a plant is fully dormant, you might find conditions are too wet or cold. If we have a wet autumn and icy winter, you can always wait till next spring.

With a wide range of perennials, including nepeta, helianthus and sedums, the lifting technique is very similar. The roots will have spread a little beyond the outer leaves, so dig round the perimeter with a fork and ease the crown up. When dealing with a large clump, cut it in half with a sharp spade and lift each section separately. If, like most folk, including myself sometimes, you've let the plant grow huge before dividing, lifting will be none too easy, so you'll need to reward yourself with a nice cup of tea or whatever tippie seems appropriate. But first shake the soil off and soak your trophy. I use the burn, but a large bucket would be fine.

Once refreshed, you then divide according to the species. Some plants, like Ajuga, bugle, produce individual plantlets that you can tease off easily. Having first soaked the roots, you'll do much less damage to them. Small fibrous-rooted plants, like geraniums, are separated this way.

Large clumps, say of Hemorocallis, day lily, need to be treated differently. Stick 2 forks in the centre of the crown, back to back, and then pull the handles towards each other to push each half of the crown apart. You might even need to use a sharp spade, a hatchet or a lawn edger to complete the division and repeat this process till you've got the clumps the size you want. Cut plants with woody roots, like hellebores, or soft fleshy rooted delphiniums, with a sharp spade, making sure you leave between 3 and 5 healthy shoots on each piece.

Be sure to keep the roots moist so stick the clumps in a bucket of water while you're getting the planting hole ready. It should be deep enough for the top of crown to sit at ground level, and wide enough to let you spread out the roots without restricting them. The soil will be the plants food supply for a few years, so use a generous amount of good, home-made compost and a sprinkling of seaweed meal. Firm the soil round the clump and water well.

You're likely to end up with more plants than you've space for, so will hopefully find friends to take the rest. But before dispensing your largesse, check the roots aren't acting as Trojan Horses for weeds, flat worms or vine weevil. And it's just as important to check this out if you receive these gifts. I remember happily accepting some hedging roses from a relative many years ago only to find that a few fragments of ground elder were nestling between the roots. From such humble beginnings, these thugs colonised great swathes of the garden. Oh, for the wisdom then that I've belatedly acquired: it would have saved years of heartache. Small orange or white vine weevil eggs or smooth pepper corn-like flat worm eggs will just as easily hitch a ride. Once in your garden, vine weevil will consume the roots of plants, especially smaller and

potted ones, while flat worms will devour every earth worm, leaving the soil wet and airless. Fortunately, you can eradicate vine weevil by using a biological control, but you'll have problems with flatworms. You can catch them hiding under planks and flat stones and kill by putting into a bucket of salty water but it's almost impossible to eradicate the pest, especially as we have no natural predators for this New Zealand immigrant. Happily, a lengthy soak before or after the handover will prevent all this.

Disposing of surplus crowns isn't easy. They will not compost down well and will not go through a domestic shredder. Fly tipping is totally irresponsible but you should be able to put them in your green waste bin or take them to a recycling centre.