



A44 Dividing plants



This simple technique is a valuable way of splitting up and rejuvenating established perennial plants into smaller pieces, each section becoming a new plant. It works for most plants that have a spreading rootball with plenty of shoots at soil level. This is especially useful for flowering plants that attract beneficial insects, such as asters (see S4.8), as well as herbs such as mint and vegetables such as rhubarb.

Resources

- Plants for dividing
- Tools including spade, forks, hand forks, large knife
- Compost for replanting
- Pots for repotting

Activity

- 1 Plan which plants to divide and where to replant the new sections in beds or pots.
- 2 Select healthy, disease free plants for dividing. Division is best done when plants are dormant in autumn or spring, avoiding very cold conditions or very wet/dry weather.
- 3 Divide your plants and replant sections following instructions on the next page.

Extended activity

Make a list of plants in your garden that could be divided. Start propagating plants that would help expand your garden over the next 12-24 months, such as a new flower bed or area for perennial vegetables, eg globe artichokes. Also propagate plants to sell or swap at community garden events.

Health & Safety

Be careful when digging up plants. Follow Manual Handling guidelines for lifting or moving heavy rootballs (SG1.3). Take extra care too when manoeuvring tools to divide rootballs, eg two forks back to back can suddenly release when force splits the rootball apart; similarly with a spade or knife cutting through roots.

See also *Health and Safety Guidelines (Section SG1.2)*

Further information

S4.8 Choosing attractant plants

G4.7 Increasing plant stocks

'Propagating Plants' by Alan Toogood, Royal Horticultural Society. ISBN 1405315253

Top tip



Example crops for division

Herbs: chamomile, chives, fennel, horse radish, hyssop, lemon balm, marjoram, mint, sorrel, tarragon, thyme.

Vegetables/fruit: globe artichoke, raspberry, rhubarb, seakale.

Flowering plants: aster, Astartia, Anemone hupehensis, coneflower, geranium, Helen's flower, phlox, rudbeckia, ice plant, scabious, goldenrod, yarrow, some grasses.

Plants for making liquid feed (see A41), eg comfrey, nettles.

Dividing plants

1 Start digging up the plant to divide. Carefully work around the rootball with a fork, loosening the roots without breaking too many. Lift the rootball out whole.



2 Carefully shake off excess soil from the rootball and remove dead leaves and stems. This makes it easier to see the best shoots and roots, usually around the edge (especially with older plants).



3 Start dividing the rootball; first in half and then into quarters if large enough. Aim to leave good size sections with strong growing buds (at least two) and roots. Use appropriate tools and force depending on the toughness of roots.



Some fibrous root systems can be pulled apart by hand. Others need teasing apart with two forks, ie position back to back so tines are close and handles together; then pull handles apart to split rootball.



Woody or thick roots are best cut with spade or knife, washing the rootball if needed to see the buds clearly. Discard the woodiest part in the middle and keep the more vigorous edge sections.

4 Replant each section immediately; success rate drops if they dry out. Plant at the same depth as the original plants. Water in gently and keep watered until established.



Replant sections spaced widely in the original site or elsewhere. Mix in compost to the topsoil first if needed for added nutrition. Spread out the roots and allow sufficient room between plants.



Pot up sections into pots big enough to hold all the roots. Use home-made growing mix or bought organic, peat-free potting compost. Once growing well, plant out or sell/swap.