

Perennials

Divide and conquer!

New or Old?

- Are you working in an established bed?
- Creating new?
- Let's take a moment and talk about the BIGGEST problem of any garden bed.
- Anyone want to take a guess?

GRASS!!!!

(And maybe a few perennial weeds)

- What is it about grass that makes it a problem?

The roots have growth nodes all along its length, you cut it, and it just multiplies, a lot. A whole lot.

Rototilling a chunk of lawn to make a new bed just makes more grass.

Have you ever been able to get the entire root system out when weeding?
You can knock it back, but it will return.

How do you remove the problem?

- Strip the grass off the bed, cutting deep to get as much of the root system as possible.
- Cover with black plastic and weight it down to have contact with the soil.
- Leave this in place for a few weeks, better if the weather is hot.
- Recheck and remove any new growth.
- You can also use a grass and weed killing product, however if you do, make sure to wait the recommended time before planting.

Amendments

- If you are able, it helps to amend your soil
- Soil can be heavy with a high clay content.
- Adding in compost will lighten the soil and help add nutrients.
- If you have heavy clay soil, do not add sand. This is the equivalent of making your own concrete.
- Roots need oxygen. Heavy compacted soil does not allow for air pores.

Okay, back to the main course, perennials

- Let's say you have that lovely flower bed, free of grass and weeds, beautifully amended. (in my dreams)
- Points to consider before planting or replanting:
 1. Spacing
 2. Sun or shade
 3. Water requirements
 4. Height-Tall, short, medium?
 5. Bloom times
 6. Color

When to divide?

- Signs or reasons that a plant needs to be divided-

1. The center has died out- This happens a lot with grasses, especially 'Karl Forester'
2. The roots or rhizomes, tubers and bulbs, are on the surface and there is little vegetation or blooms- iris, tulips, crocosmia, commonly overgrow themselves and push to the surface.
3. The plant has outgrown its space.
4. The plant is not performing well.
5. You realized you never should have planted it in that location.
6. You realized the plant is a nasty little thug that is taking over the garden. (This is when you kindly share with your friends, who may not be talking to you in a couple years.)

Who doesn't get divided?

- Plants that have a central tap root do not divide well.

Oriental poppy, Columbine, Lavendar, Baptista, Sea Holly, Gaillardia, are a few examples.

If you have small, young seedlings popping up in the garden, they can be carefully dug up and moved, just do not cut the tap root.

Timing

- Rule of thumb-
- Spring blooming plants should be divided in the fall.
- Fall and late summer bloomers are divided in spring.

Why?

- Digging a plant while in bloom will stress it out and weaken it. Plants use a lot of energy to produce blooms.
- Heat- It is better to dig plants in the cooler seasons- spring and fall, as heat stress affects growth
- You want to enjoy the flowers, so let them finish before digging.

Steps:

- Cut the foliage back. Let the plant put energy into new root growth.
- Use clean, sharp tools.
- Dig carefully, trying not to damage too many roots.
- Once you have the root ball out of the ground, separate it into sections. You can take some soil off, but I like to leave as much as I can.
- Remove any damaged roots using sterilized, sharp pruners.
- Either replant or pot up extras.
- Any potted plants should be watered and put in a shady spot.

Tools

- Flat backed spades- long or short handles. Long handles give more leverage, short handles work better in tight spaces.
- Diamond point or flat blades
- Garden fork
- Loppers
- Pruners

Tools.2

- All steel construction can really give you some “pry” power.
- You can manage with a curve back shovel, but it is difficult to chop roots with one. For those well entrenched giant root systems, you will need something that can slice and dice.
- Yes, in a perfect world, you are digging out the entire plant, however, some of these are monsters. You will want to get them out in parts. How many of us own mini excavators?
- A sturdy garden fork will work to loosen a root ball without damaging the roots too much. Go around the ball, loosening up the soil and then try to pop the entire root ball out.

Tools.3

- Clean, sharp tools take a lot of the work out of digging.
- Spades with stuck on dirt and dull blades need more power-(that means you) to work.
- Disinfect tools between plants if there is a chance of spreading disease.
- 90% rubbing alcohol, a 10% bleach solution, or other sanitizer will work.

Replanting

- Dig the hole about twice as wide as the root ball, but not too deep. You want the new plant at the same height as before.
- If replanting iris, leave part of the “back” exposed, Choose firm, good looking rhizomes with nice roots. Discard any mushy, shrunken, holey specimens.
- Bulbs that worked their way to the surface should be replanted at recommended depths. Choose large corms or bulbs to replant, discard any shrunken or diseased ones.

Let's finish the job!

- Make sure the new plant is watered in well
- Do not fertilize with a nitrogen forward fertilizer. Nitrogen promotes leaf growth, and right now you want the root system to start growing.
- If you used a good compost in planting, that should be enough for the first year.
- If your soil is less than stellar, you may use an organic fertilizer that is non burning, i.e. weak. 1-2-2 or 0-2-5, something with similar numbers.

Now what?

- Sit back and enjoy your newly revitalized plant.
- It may take another season before it blooms well, but it is a much happier plant now, with more “leg” room.
- If you have quite a few plants that need dividing, set up a schedule. Maybe half this year, half next. Or-
- Have a garden party and hand everyone a spade! Many hands make light work, plus every gardener I know enjoys working with similarly deranged people. (it is an obsession) (albeit a healthy one) (maybe not an inexpensive one) (okay we are all garden nuts!)
- But we love what we do!

Thank-you!

(Go forth and multiply)

