



DIVIDING PERENNIALS

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The Art, Science, & Timing of Division

Dividing perennials is part propagation, part plant first aid, and part garden design. And in the PNW, it's a seasonal ritual that keeps gardens thriving through wet winters and dry summers. When you divide a crowded clump, you renew vigor, improve airflow, prevent disease, and get new plants (for free!).

With learning correct timing comes some clear signs that a plant is overdue: a hollow or dead center ringed by healthy growth, reduced flowering, flopping congested stems, or roots encroaching on neighbors. Most perennials benefit from division every 3-5 years.

The PNW Advantage

Our cool nights (temperatures dropping to the low 50°Fs, even in July), marine-influenced morning overcast, and deep loamy soils make summer division more viable here than almost anywhere else in North America. The golden window is late June through mid-July, while a second window opens as the rains return.

Three Core Benefits of Regular Division

Renewed Vigor

Division removes aging, exhausted root tissue and stimulates fresh, productive growth. Younger divisions flower more abundantly and produce stronger stems with less staking required.

Disease Prevention

Crowded clumps trap moisture and restrict airflow, creating ideal conditions for powdery mildew, crown rot, and botrytis - all common PNW problems. Regular division breaks this cycle before it starts.

Free Plants

One crowded clump of Astilbe or Hemerocallis can yield 6-12 divisions - enough to fill a new border, share with neighbors, or bring to a plant swap!

The PNW Perennial Roster

The following perennials are mainstays of PNW gardens. Summer division works for many - but technique and aftercare vary by species root architecture and tolerance.

Astilbe	Hemerocallis
When: Late April-May or September Method: Two-fork method Notes: Dislikes dry summer division - wait for fall if possible	When: Late June-July Method: Pull apart/two fork Notes: Cut foliage to 6"; water daily 2 weeks post division
Crocsmia	Heuchera
When: Late June-July Method: Corm separation Notes: Lift corm chains; replant 3" deep; naturalizes beautifully in the PNW!	When: Spring or early July Method: Basal offsets Notes: Remove the woody stem base; plant crown flush with soil
Echinacea	Hosta
When: Spring or late August Method: Crown division Notes: Taproot - handle gently; divide a maximum every 4 years	When: Early spring or late August Method: Pull apart/soil knife Notes: Full shade required; avoid peak summer heat; watch for slugs
Geranium (Hardy Non-Annual Varieties)	Rudbeckia
When: Early July Method: Pull apart Notes: Cut back hard after division; rebounds quickly in PNW	When: Spring or late August Method: Crown division Notes: Vigorous spreader; divide every 3 years to contain spread

The PNW Native Advantage

Species native to the PNW (e.g., *Dicentra formosa*, *Camassia*, *Polystichum munitum*) are remarkably forgiving of late-summer division! When in doubt about a PNW native, divide in late August as the first rains begin to return.

From Shovel to Thriving: The First 30 Days

A successful summer division isn't complete at transplanting - it's just beginning. Water management over the next 30 days is everything! A correctly watered division can establish beautifully; one neglected for even a few days in August heat can fail.

Step-by-Step Planting Protocol

Soak the Planting Hole

Fill the hole with water and let it drain fully before inserting the division. This charges the root zone and reduces transplant shock.

Plant at the Correct Depth

Replant at the same depth the plant was growing, with an exception: Heuchera and Tiarella's woody stems should be buried to encourage new crown formation.

Firm Soil Gently

Eliminate air pockets with your hands - not your foot! Air pockets can cause roots to dry rapidly and cause division failure.

Mulch Immediately

Apply 2-3" of arborist chips or shredded bark around the crown. In PNW summers, mulch reduces soil moisture loss by up to 70% and keeps roots 10-15°F cooler.

Shade for 7-14 Days

Row cover, burlap, or a propped pallet works well. Even 40% shade reduction dramatically improves summer division survival rates.

Watering Schedule for PNW Summer Divisions

Days 1-7: Water daily. Deep soak; check soil at 3" - should feel consistently moist.

Days 8-14: Water every other day. Watch foliage; any wilting = increase frequency!

Days 15-21: Water every 3 days. Roots establishing; adjust based on heat spikes.

Days 22-30: Water weekly. Transition to normal irrigation schedule.

Days 30 and Beyond: Established - reduce supplemental watering.

When Divisions Struggle: Diagnosis & Recovery

The first 2-3 weeks after summer division often look discouraging. Foliage may yellow, wilt, or drop entirely. However, this is normal! The plant is prioritizing root establishment over top growth, and you should resist the urge to fertilize. By week 4, bright new foliage emerging from the crown will be your signal that the division has succeeded!

Problem: Wilting and Leaf Scorch

Solution: Cut foliage back 50-75%, increase watering frequency, add shade cloth. Most PNW perennials can rebound within 2 weeks (if caught early)!

Problem: Crown Rot

Solution: Caused by planting too deep, overwatering in poorly-drained soil, or by using blunt tools that bruise tissue, mushy, dark tissue at the base releases a foul odor. Remove affected tissue, dust surfaces with powdered sulfur or cinnamon, improve drainage, and replant at the correct depth.

Problem: No New Growth After 3 Weeks

Solution: Division was likely too small, roots dried out during handling, or soil was too cold or compacted. Scratch the crown gently - green tissue means life! Patience and moisture are the cure.

Problem: Slug and Earwig Pressure

Solution: Fresh cuts and young growth attract slugs. Apply bait around (but not on!) new divisions. A ring of coarse grit or copper tape also helps. Check at night with a flashlight for the first two weeks.



Potting Up Divisions

Not every division needs to go straight into the ground. Potting up divisions in a quality mix and growing them under protection for 4-6 weeks can produce stronger, more resilient plants. Plus, it gives you the flexibility to place them exactly where they belong in your design. This approach is especially valuable for small divisions, rare cultivars, or any plant divided during the stressful mid-August window.

The Pot-and-Grow Method

Choose the Right Pot Size

Use a container just slightly larger than the root mass - overpotting leads to soggy soil and root rot. A quart-size nursery pot is right for many perennial divisions, but at least a 1 gallon pot is needed for larger crowns.

Use Quality Mix

Garden soil compacts in pots and often drains poorly. Using a quality potting mix with perlite and a slow-release fertilizer will help your divisions thrive!

Location & Duration

Place pots in bright, indirect light or under shade cloth. Keep consistently moist, but never waterlogged. Most divisions are ready to plant out in 4-6 weeks when roots fill the pot and new foliage is vigorous.

Hardening Off

Before transplanting pot-and-grow divisions to the open garden, expose them gradually to more sun over 5-7 days - just like hardening off seedlings. This prevents the foliage shock that trips up many gardeners.

Division as Design: Planning Your Plant-Sharing Strategy

Systematic division creates a surplus of plants that can transform your garden economy. Keep a simple notebook or phone note tracking which perennials need division each year, the quantity expected, and who you plan to share them with!

Full-Year Division Planner for PNW Gardeners

Month	Priority Divides	Key Tasks
March-April	- Ornamental grasses - Hostas (early) - Agapanthus	- Before 6" of growth emerges; - Best for most crown divisions.
May-June	- Astilbe - Dicentra - Perennial Geranium - Primula	- Golden spring window; - Low stress; - Abundant soil moisture.
Late June-July	- Hemerocallis - Crocsmia - Heuchera - Penstemon	- Prime summertime division window! - Shade and daily irrigation required.
August 1-15	Delay divisions, if possible!	- Emergency divisions only; - Early morning required; - Maximum aftercare needed.
August 15-September	- Echinacea - Rudbeckia - Salvia - Late-blooming perennials	- Second prime window; - Rains start to return; - Excellent establishment!
October-November	- Hosta - Astilbe - Most summer bloomers	- Easiest timing of the year for divisions; - Plants enter dormancy.
December-February	Planning only - no division!	- Assess what needs splitting; - Order new cultivars; - Sharpen tools.