

“Propagation Primer II – Division”
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2-23-11

Winter strips trees and shrubs and turns herbaceous perennials to piles of mush. It's then a gardener can see how once dainty nursery transplants have turned prima donna instead of ensemble players in a garden scheme. Sometimes dividing over-achieving plants resets the balance. As a bonus, division produces daughters to replant or share.

Division, propagation by breaking apart a plant, requires keen observation, gentle disentanglement, surgical cuts, a saw, sharpened spade, or ax depending on the plant. It's pretty easy and mostly successful. Candidate species include perennials that have the habit of clumping with multiple stems arising from a fibrous root base. The idea is to gently tease or sometimes chop apart roots with stems attached.

For example, last winter I envisioned a *Cornus kousua* surrounded by varieties of *Epimedium*. I dug up big old *Epimedium* clumps, carefully leaving lots of room around the roots, shook and tapped off the soil until I could observe where the roots attached to stems. Then I gently pulled apart, and using pruners and a sharp pocketknife, cut through the mother plant to detach rooted stems then immediately replanted them. Effect achieved.

A monster *Hosta* required sterner measures. After trenching around the congested roots, I used a sharpened spade to slice the whole plant into quarters without lifting it out of the ground. Then with a pruning saw and muscle, three of the quarters were completely separated, grubbed out and rearranged elsewhere. Compost and native soil filled the void. The monster was tamed to a more pleasing size in situ. An overgrown clump of Hemerocallis (Daylily) came next. This I dug out completely, hosed off the roots for a clearer view of the root/stem junctions, then pried and sawed through the tough center creating several separate plants. A *Carex buechananii* (Leather Leafed Sedge) received similar treatment. Replanted into a swath on the edge of a dry slope, they look more natural wafting in every little breeze.

As always, newly planted specimens need watering or a good rain to settle in. Besides producing more, dividing often rejuvenates tired old plants. Winter is a forgiving time to try this technique as divisions have several months to establish before the rainy season turns to summer drought.

To learn more, see Sunset's *Western Garden Book*, chapter titled “A Practical Guide to Gardening”.