



Dividing hostas

What better way to enjoy gardening than to create whole new areas from plants you already have - this is the joy of division, and hostas are no exception.

This month Lenore and I share our top tips and techniques for dividing hostas...

Why divide?

Besides the advantage of obtaining more plants for free, dividing hostas is a great way to encourage good, even, growth and to maintain the health of your plant.

How do I know I need to divide my hosta?

Generally speaking, ground grown hostas do not require dividing as often as container grown plants. This is because they have room for the roots to develop naturally, according to the characteristics of the variety in question.

However, as each variety matures it can become rather too densely packed for its own good, at which point it is worth digging the plant up and giving it some attention in the same way as with container grown plants. All hosta varieties have an approximate size they will grow to but the best way to tell if your plant needs attention is to have a look at the shoots in the spring. **If the shoots are touching each other, the plant would benefit from dividing.**

A healthy plant needs healthy roots so checking the condition of the roots is something that is well worth doing occasionally, even if your plant seems quite content. If your plant isn't performing as expected, I would advise you to check the roots and while you are at it give it a treat with a root wash - see side column.

If your hosta starts to flower prematurely and has produced little, or no, foliage it is a good sign your plant isn't happy.

This is likely to be more serious than just seasonal confusion so once again it is best to check the roots and re-pot as described in the next section.

The division process

Tools required:

- a hose with an adjustable nozzle
- a large bucket and/or tank
- a blunt short-bladed knife
- a sharp, short-bladed knife
- bleach
- jam jar

Over the next few images I talk through the process starting with removing the plant from its pot. In this case it is a maturing [H. 'Snowden'](#), which looks like it needs more room to grow.



In the photo you can see I have had to move it using a sack barrow and have stuck the end of the hose into the pot to thoroughly wet the root ball:

If your variegated hosta starts to produce plain leaves it is usually a sign of reversion, or sporting, which is something many perennials have in common.

Simply speaking, reversion, and sporting, of plain leaves are nature's way of giving a plant a better chance of survival. Variegated leaves are not as efficient at producing sugars to feed the roots as plain-leaved leaves and some varieties of hosta are not sufficiently strong growers to maintain their variegation. Routine division of variegated cultivars does tend to help maintain variegation.

In both cases, if you spot this happening to your plant then remove the plain leaved-section at the root as soon as possible to avoid it becoming dominant. Grow the plain-leaved version separately as it will provide a lovely companion foil for the variegated original. Conversely, a plain-leaved cultivar can suddenly develop variegated leaves. If this happens it might be best to separate this section of the plant from the rest and grow it on to see what happens. It is up to you.

How do I divide my hosta?

Last autumn I divided a rather droopy [H. 'Snowden'](#), which was struggling to get water to the roots because it needed more room. I show how I did it in the side column, including some photos and useful tips on each part of the process.

What soil do I plant my divisions in?

Although hostas can do really well in rubbish soil, they would prefer a more conducive environment to bring out their best qualities. The best way to gauge what you should grow your plant in is to once again look at the root system.

Hosta root systems vary from spreading stoloniferous types to hard tuber-like corms. You can usually tell the former when looking at how the shoots tend to want to emerge at the sides of the container they are in. These are good varieties for ground cover as they tend out their roots for more widely to create a mat of growth. The latter tend to produce a mass of tuber-like growth which can have a habit of dying back in sections, especially when the plant has insufficient room for the roots to develop. The *H. sieboldiana* branch of the genus is particularly prone to crown rot in their heavy tuberous roots and you may find you suddenly lose an old variety that has been performing brilliantly for many years, for no apparent reason. Indeed we have found this tendency in some of the [Tardiana types](#) too, probably due to their relationship with *H. sieboldiana*.

Wetting the root ball

This should make it easier to remove the plant from the pot. If you lay the pot on its side when you do this, you should be able to see a gap between the plant and the pot. At this point you should be able to upend the pot and the plant should slide out. If it is a plastic pot then a slight squeeze of the sides will help.



Adjust the nozzle on the hose to as narrow a jet as possible and direct it into the base of the root ball. It's a messy job but it will help dislodge most of the soil and leave you with a mat of roots:



Once you have the roots exposed you can see better how they are entwined and it should look more obvious how the separate them.

At this stage **fill your jam jar with a 50-50 bleach and water mix** and pop your knives into it. Remember to pop your knives

Stoloniferous cultivars, and those with very fine root systems benefit from a more open soil mix whereas those with a more chunky and thick root system tend to do better in heavier soils. This presented quite a problem for us when trying to identify peat alternatives back in the 1990s and we spent a great deal of time experimenting with different mixes to achieve a good balance across the different root systems.

I have put our basic soil mix recipe in the side column, after the division process.

NOTE on recycled soil

We used to re-use our soil around the nursery rather than add it back into the mix. However, the structure of it is so good, it often has worms working in it, so we now add it back into our mix. We do have a series of dumpy bags we use on rotation so that the used soil sits for a period of time to further develop the micro-organisms all soil needs to recover its structure prior to using it again.

When to divide

There are several schools of thought on the best time of year to divide hostas. In our experience the best results are when the plant is 'in the green', above the soil during the season. Indeed I would caution against disturbing your hostas during dormancy, which usually lasts from around October to April.

If you divide in the spring it gives the plants all season to settle. We tend to divide and/or re-pot smaller varieties in the spring. If you do damage the early growth there is plenty of time for the plant to put up a second flush of leaves.

Dividing in the autumn is good for plants with a lot of foliage, you wouldn't want to damage mid-season. We tend to leave the larger plants until later on, when they have done most of their work feeding the roots. Dividing in the autumn, when the sap is no longer rising, reduces the risk of spreading disease.

Hostas are great plants with very little that will harm them.

However, if you grow hostas you should acquaint yourself with Hosta Virus X (HVX). The best thing you can do to avoid this issue is to be careful where you buy your plants as not all outlets will be aware of the issue. There have been a number of alarming articles on the subject so I would like to steer you to the [American Hosta Society's HVX research](#) as I believe this to be the most balanced and tested information available on the subject.

Dividing plants when they are too young.

back into the jar every time you have finished using them.



Tease and pull

I would always say it is better to gently tease the roots apart rather than cut, which is where my blunt knife comes in. Insert the knife into the base of the root ball and waggle it about (technical term). If you need to make an incision then use the sharp knife but again, doing this from underneath the crown helps avoid unnecessary damage to the petioles and makes a route into the mass for your fingers. You should then be able to pull the mass apart more easily. Again, water helps with this process.



I divided this plant in September so although the leaves were still functioning to feed the plant, they were starting to lose their colour so I decided to take them off to help make it easier to handle.

My heart always sinks when customers greedily look at a their purchase and work out how many they could divide it into - please be patient, even if your best gardening buddy wants a piece. Patience is a virtue and it would be best to let your plant settle for a year or two before dividing. Some varieties don't do so well if divided too much so temper your desire to wield your knife too soon.

Now, over to Lenore...



Greetings Gardeners,

Spring is here at last. The snow is nearly gone from our Maine, U.S.A., garden, except for a small mountain of snow deposited by snowplows over the winter. The ice has melted from the river and our geese have returned. Here in Maine these are maple sugar days, when sugar maples are tapped for their sap, to be turned into maple syrup. We Mainers call this time "mud season," as the heavy snow melt leaves the ground wet and muddy. Our hostas won't appear for another month or later. The photo above from May 4th of last year shows our hostas just emerging.

Spring is a great time to divide hostas. We grow almost all our hostas in the ground, rather than in pots. My preferred way of dividing them is to cut out a section or more by inserting a clean spade between the newly-emerged eyes and digging out the desired portion. The majority of the roots remain intact, with minimal disturbance to the plant. The removed portion can then be split into smaller divisions by teasing apart the roots or cutting with a knife if needed. I carefully replace the soil around the main plant and give it plenty of water. In every case where we have divided a hosta, the main plant has thrived and the divisions have grown rapidly and flourished.

We rarely divide our giant hostas. They may require about six years to reach maturity, and when they do, their size is impressive in the



Once I have divided large clumps of hosta into sections, I transfer them to a bucket of water with a splash of bleach and spend a few minutes massaging the roots. The weak bleach solution helps remove any invisible pathogens that may inhibit the growth of the plant - we call it the 'spa treatment' because it really helps pep up your hosta.



Finally, you will have a nice multi-headed division of the parent to pot up or plant out. If your plant hasn't be divided for

garden. I did divide one of my favorite giant hostas last year, a very large 'Big Daddy.' It was 25 years old and the middle had begun to die out, indicating it was too crowded. We were happy to share divisions with friends.

We divide small and medium hostas more frequently, either to give to friends or to create additional plants for the garden. Several years ago, when a small side area of our yard became too shady for grass, I turned it into a hosta garden using only divisions from existing plants, including 'Blue Cadet,' 'Chinese Sunrise,' 'June,' 'Striptease,' and 'Pineapple Upside Down Cake' - see photo below.

Spring may be the easiest time to divide in-ground hostas, but they can be divided any time during the growing season. Planting hosta divisions in fall can give them a head start in developing roots before the following spring. The key is to provide good soil and to water frequently until the ground freezes.

Happy spring!

All the best,
Lenore



I hope you have found this issue useful - good luck with your own dividing and if you have any questions, please do get in touch.

Speak soon,

Team Mickfield Hostas

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several years then don't be tempted to over divide it - you don't want to shock it!

Soil mix

- recycled soil from the nursery (40%)
- Dalefoot sheep's wool and bracken potting compost (50%)
- sterilised loam (5%)
- sharp sand (5%)
- blood fish and bone (depends on the volume of mix)

Over the years we have experimented with many different combinations of soil mix. Apart from the disaster we faced with a peat substitute product back in 1999, we have never experienced poor growth from any soil mix. However, this experience did lead us to question the advisability of single product use, preferring to mix our own, on site, from established products. That way, if anything does fail, it is only part of the mix and so is less likely to damage plants growing in it.