



Dividing Herbaceous Peonies

George Hernandez-Klehm Nursery, Avalon, Wisconsin

Any plant that is over five years old will be difficult to divide because of the density of the matted roots. Three to five-year-old plants seem to yield the greatest number of usable three-to-five eye divisions.

Before starting to cut it is best to count the number of eyes on the plant. Then after looking over the plant and counting the eyes, try to find where all major roots join the crown. Before cutting anything, you should determine how many three-to-five eye divisions can be made. This is done by looking for those portions of the plant that have three-to-five eyes and where three-to-five finger-sized roots or their equivalent are connected to the crown or to each other. As the plant is being assessed to determine where the first cut is to be made, prune off any broken or damaged roots and trim the stems back to the eyes. The stems are tough and should be cut with hand pruners.

When you are ready to make the first cut, place the plant on a stable work surface and keep it secure while you are cutting. Start all cuts by carefully inserting the point of the knife into the root and smoothly complete each cut with a single motion. Do not chop or hack at the root or it will split unevenly. Next, if the portion of the crown you are trying to divide is too thick to cut through completely, then with your knife cut around the crown where you can reach and gently pull apart the cut portions. The three-to-five eye division that you have cut is now ready to be trimmed.

The roots of the division should be trimmed to a length of six or seven inches. Peony divisions perform best when all of the smaller thread-like roots are removed. This forces the plant to produce new large secondary roots, which are formed near the ends of the remaining roots. The removal of these smaller roots not only promotes new root development, but also aids in the prevention of disease. The smaller roots desiccate more readily and in their weakened condition become more susceptible to attack by fungal organisms.

A well-trimmed division will allow ample room for new roots to form and for existing roots to increase in girth without growing into one another. Any diseased portions of the root should be removed and irregular wounds should be cut smooth. Older plants with large roots often have hollow centers. These should be cleaned and examined for rot.

Hybrid peonies are difficult to divide, but the same method is used.

Experienced cutters will always look any plant over before making a cut. It may be necessary to trim excess roots away in order to see more clearly. Patience seems to correspond to success in the division of peony roots. The physiological requirements of a peony are the foundation of the viability of their divisions. The dividing of hybrid root requires not only patience and common sense but also practice. Expect smaller divisions when cutting hybrids, because there is less root mass than with other peonies. However, these hybrid divisions must have enough root to support the eyes that remain.

The crown of the hybrid is very distinct. The eyes develop on its upper portions, while the roots radiate from its lower portions. This unique formation is what makes dividing the hybrid difficult. Longitudinal cuts of the crown are often the only cuts that will yield divisions. A steady hand is needed to slice through the crown while avoiding any eyes that may lay in the path that the knife must follow. There are no secrets or short cuts for the successful cutting of hybrid roots. Practice is the best way to master the skill.

All roots should be cut back to four to eight inches. The best divisions of a large plant are on the outside. The best divisions have the roots joined to the crown or near the base of the eyes. Trim all divisions so the cut surfaces are smooth and clean and there are no cut pockets in the crown.

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