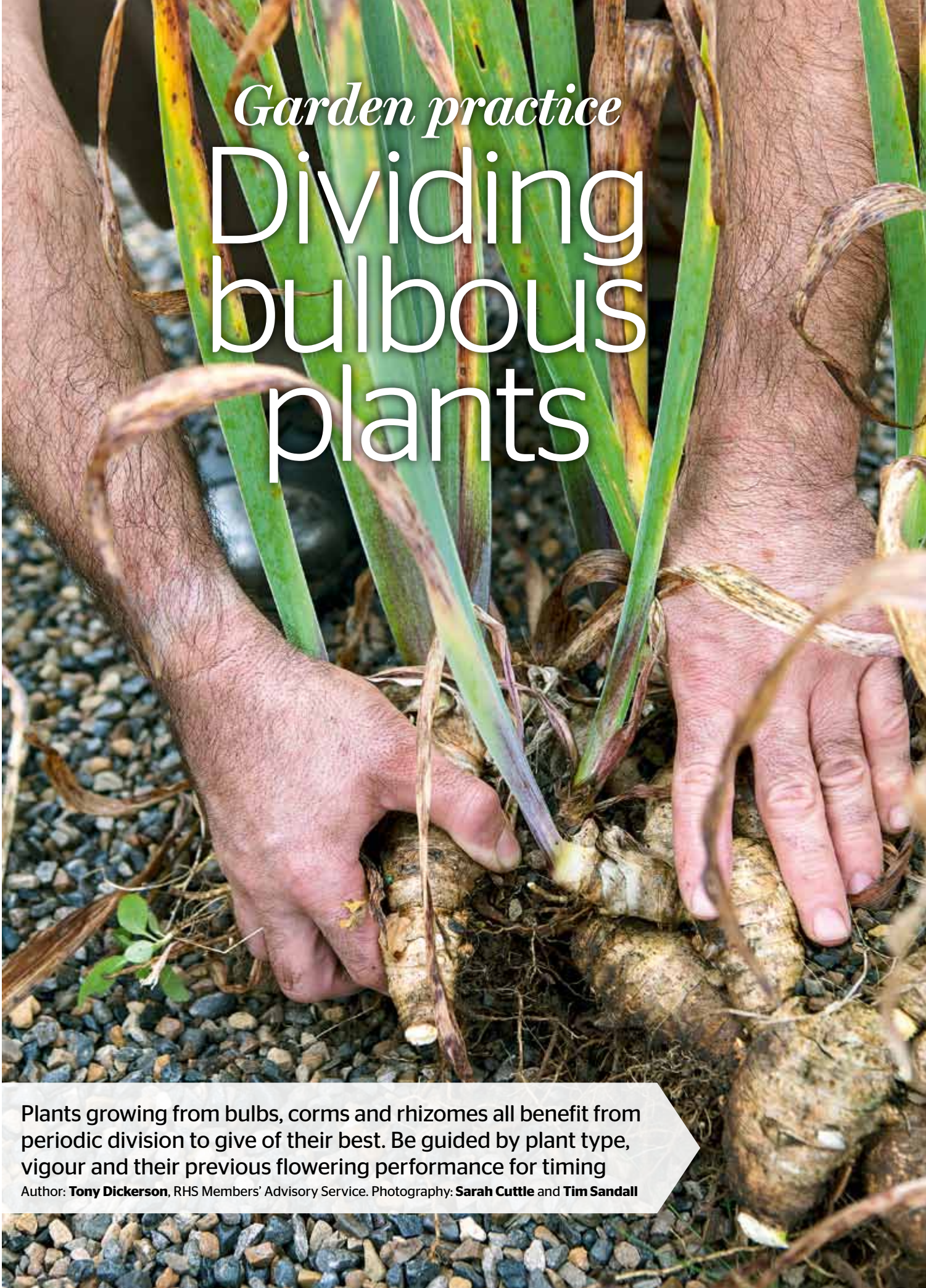
Garden practice

Dividing bulbous plants



Plants growing from bulbs, corms and rhizomes all benefit from periodic division to give of their best. Be guided by plant type, vigour and their previous flowering performance for timing

Author: **Tony Dickerson**, RHS Members' Advisory Service. Photography: **Sarah Cuttle** and **Tim Sandall**

RHS/SARAH CUTTLE

Bulbs are justifiably popular among gardeners for their ease of cultivation and floral impact. Whether it is the cheerful flowers of snowdrops and daffodils heralding spring, the bright blooms of gladioli and lilies in summer borders, or under-used autumn-flowering colchicum and crocus, all are worth their space in even the smallest of gardens. Most are also agreeably low maintenance, requiring little more than a dressing of fertiliser as their shoots appear, and the cutting back of old foliage at the end of their season.

However, bulbs can be victims of their own success in becoming crowded after a few years, their flowering deteriorating as a result. You can plant new stock in fresh ground, but lifting and dividing your existing stock is the other, less expensive option. This also keeps vigorous growers such as *Crocosmia* within their allotted space.

Dividing bulbs

With few exceptions, the best time to lift and divide bulbous plants is as they are becoming dormant, when their foliage is dying back. Once lifted, pick out large, flowering-sized bulbs or corms (for definitions see box, opposite) for replanting. Small bulblets or cormlets can be lined out in fertile soil to grow on for two or three seasons to reach flowering size (or discarded if space is tight).

With rhizomes, use a sharp knife to create divisions from the edge of the clump of plump and healthy growth, each with at least one vigorous terminal bud. Any old, shrivelled sections can be discarded.

Dig over the site, adding a little well-rotted organic matter and a slow-release fertiliser, such as Vitax Q4. Bulbs and divisions will make root growth in autumn while the soil is warm and give better displays the following season (but rhizomatous plants may need a season to recover).

Plants that respond particularly well to division every few years include *Agapanthus*, *Narcissus*, *Crocosmia* and bearded iris. It is an easy, virtually foolproof way to improve next year's garden show.


Lift iris clumps carefully.

Bearded iris

Dividing rhizomatous species

✣ Every three to five years divide plants in summer, about a month after flowering.
✣ With vigorous plants, cut away and discard old, central rhizomes. Leave the outermost pieces *in situ* to spread out.
✣ Or, lift the whole plant with a fork, shake roots free of soil and break the clump up into manageable pieces.
✣ Use a clean, sharp knife to detach new, young rhizomes. Each piece should be about 10cm (4in) long with a good root system and fan of leaves. Discard old, exhausted sections.
✣ Trim roots to about 10cm (4in); trim leaves to about 15cm (6in) in a mitred shape to prevent wind rock.
✣ Replant rhizomes singly or in groups of three 15–30cm (6–12in) apart.
✣ Firm in and water until established.

Anemone nemorosa

Handle thin rhizomes with care

✣ Lift clumps as the leaves die back in late spring.
✣ The rhizomes are thin and extremely brittle. Either break clumps up into large pieces for replanting or wash away the soil so you can separate out individual lengths of rhizome up to 8cm (3in) long, each bearing at least one bud.
✣ Plant immediately 5cm (2in) deep and water in.
✣ Divide tuberous species of anemones when they are dormant in summer.


Handle fragile anemone rhizomes with care.


Use back-to-back forks to lever clumps apart.

Agapanthus

Split overcrowded, underperforming clumps periodically

✣ Flowering clumps of agapanthus, especially deciduous types, are often best left until flowering has clearly diminished, as they have brittle roots that are easily damaged.
✣ When necessary, lift clumps and divide into large pieces using garden forks back-to-back. It is best to divide evergreen species immediately after flowering, reducing the length of leaves by half. Divide deciduous species in spring.
✣ Trim off damaged roots and any old stems.
✣ Although plants can be divided into individual crowns for propagation, by dividing plants into more substantial clumps they will recover – and so re-flower – sooner.
✣ Replant 45–60cm (18–24in) apart so the stems are at the same level in the soil as previously and water in. Agapanthus will often not flower at all in the first season after dividing.

'Gardeners tend to use the term "bulb" in a cavalier fashion'

Narcissus

Splitting overcrowded bulbs

✣ As leaves begin to die back in late spring or early summer, lift clumps with a fork about every four or five years. Shake off excess soil and gently pull the clumps apart.
✣ Select large bulbs with well-developed offsets. These can be carefully pulled apart by hand.
✣ Replant divided bulbs at three times their own depth and spaced at least their own diameter apart.
✣ Discard any diseased or old, withered bulbs.
✣ Smaller bulbs can be lined out, to grow on to flowering size, or discarded.


Tease bulbs apart carefully.

Gently lift clumps as leaves die back.

Crocosmia

Restraining vigorous corms

✣ Divide every three to four years after flowering as the foliage dies back or, alternatively, in spring. Dig at least 30cm (12in) down to avoid damaging corms and roots.
✣ Plants form congested mats of corms in 'chains'. Carefully pull clumps apart to loosen individual chains.
✣ Separate chains, cleaning away old dead stems. Do not divide into individual corms as this delays flowering.
✣ Some cultivars produce underground stems (stolons). Leave these and any attached roots.
✣ Replant the larger chains of corms at least 8–10cm (3–4in) deep and at least 8cm (3in) apart.
✣ Water in thoroughly.


Keep crocosmia chains together.

Types of bulbous plants

Gardeners tend to use the term 'bulb' in a cavalier fashion to describe plants with different botanical characteristics:
✣ **Bulbs** are swollen storage leaves with a main bud at the centre, sitting on a basal plate from which roots grow. Examples include *Narcissus* and onions. Increase vegetatively by 'daughter' bulbs formed from axillary buds, or small bulblets at the base of stems.
✣ **Corms** such as *Crocus* and *Gladiolus* are condensed stems that grow fresh each year, new on top of old, often with more than one terminal bud. More-vigorous hybrids bulk up quickly and may produce masses of tiny cormlets.
✣ **Rhizomes** are storage stems that grow horizontally, at the surface (such as bearded iris) or under the soil (*Trillium*), typically with a terminal bud and one or more lateral buds.
✣ **Tubers** are swollen storage roots such as hardy *Cyclamen*, which do not naturally increase by division, but grow larger year by year, up to dinner-plate size.

More from the RHS Enter 'Bulb division' in the search box at **www.rhs.org.uk** ✣ Search 'Bulb', 'Corm', 'Rhizome' and 'Tuber' for more on each plant type.