



# **PERENNIALS**

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Perennials are plants that live for several years and often require two or more years from seed to flower. There is a renewed interest in herbaceous perennials because they need less maintenance, less water, and fewer pesticides than annuals. Many gardeners include flowering bulbs and ornamental grasses in this category. Once prominent in many landscapes, these enduring plants are being rediscovered for their dependable seasonal effects.

Unlike trees and woody shrubs, which are also perennials, herbaceous perennials are those that appear to die down part of the year, only to emerge again the following season from underground roots, stems, bulbs, or rhizomes.

Perennials are easily used as ground covers, mixed with annuals, grown in containers, and used as accents or specimen plants. Many perennials are short bloomers and are best mixed with others that bloom at different times or included with other landscape plants as part of an overall design. Other perennial plants, such as ferns and monkey grass, are more noted for their foliage than their flowers. Inclusion of these plants adds interest and creates seasonal color or texture to the landscape.

Favorite perennials, are treasured by gardeners as heirloom plants and have proven themselves to be hardy enough to withstand our weather and climate extremes, often with little care. Others are exciting new discoveries or hybrids and may take several years to prove themselves. However, there are a good many perennial plants that simply do not survive for more than a year or two in our warm, humid climate, just as some of our favorites will not survive long in colder areas of the United States.

### **DESIGNING PERENNIAL PLANTINGS**

While beds and pots of annuals may be replanted with ease, perennial plantings may live for many years and, therefore, require some planning. Flower beds are usually highly visible and should work well into the total landscape design. Otherwise, large areas of the landscape may be bare part of the year.

Many perennials, like annuals, are effective in mass when they are in bloom, but because of their seasonality, they are better viewed as small clumps of color and texture to accent other plants. You can often build a design to support or accent a favorite plant or group of plants. Use small

evergreen shrubs, flowering trees, or such hard features as a fence, stone, bench, birdbath, or garden art to enhance a flower garden and "carry" it through all the seasons.

One of the easiest design "tricks" is to interplant groups of flowers that have contrasting shapes. For example, daylilies can have their large flowers set off well by the spikes of blue salvia and the round flowers of yarrow. The large leaves of cannas and sword-like form of iris plants have a dramatic effect when used in groups among other less bold plants. A natural way to begin planting perennials is to create islands of flowers in an open lawn, but because such beds are easily viewed from many sides, they often require high maintenance to keep them attractive.

Border plantings along a wall, fence, or hedge can soften the transition of landscape structures into the rest of the landscape or can create alleys of color. Rectangular beds lend themselves to a border planting where space is restrictive. When planting a perennial border against a hedge, fence, or wall, leave a little space between it and its backdrop. This allows for better air circulation, more light penetration, and ease of maintenance from the rear of the bed. Perennial borders often are 6 to 8 feet wide, allowing adequate space for at least a combination of six or more species, front to back, yielding a continual bloom.

To prevent turf grass from growing into the perennial bed and becoming unsightly, use some form of broad edging or separating strip. Bricks laid flat, flagstone, bare ground, or a heavy layer of mulch such as wood chips or bark will help keep out grass.

Perennials may be grouped according to color, intermixing plants that bloom at different intervals for a continual display. Early bulbs may be planted with spring yarrow and iris, which usually fade before daylilies and cannas begin their season of color. Fall sunflowers and ornamental grasses complete the season. Select plants that have not only attractive long-lived blooms, but those that have attractive foliage.

Plant height is a major consideration. In border plantings, the tallest plants are usually placed towards the rear to serve as a backdrop with a few moved forward to prevent monotony in the design. In island plantings, they are placed towards the center. Fall-blooming perennials are usually the tallest, making them the best backdrop or accent plants. Most of the middle height perennial plants are summer bloomers and may occupy the majority of the middle space. Spring-blooming perennials are primarily short plants; place them toward the front. Emerging foliage and flowers of later blooming plants can help hide the fading foliage of earlier flowers. Narrow beds with excessively tall plants are usually not effective displays. Whether for borders or island beds, keep the width of a planting about twice the height of the tallest plant.

## **SITE SELECTION AND SOIL PREPARATION**

Consider the site before selecting your plants. Although many perennials, such as ferns, tolerate heavy shade, most perennial plants require abundant sunshine. Air circulation is important for avoiding diseases; stagnant, warm, and humid air creates ideal conditions for diseases. Perennial plants also require properly prepared soil, and a few have specific drainage and fertility requirements.

Soil preparation for perennials is similar to soil preparation for annuals. However, you should devote some special attention to perennial bed preparation, because plants may occupy the site for several years with little opportunity to correct any problems. When possible, add sand and organic matter such as bark, peat, or compost to soils well ahead of planting time.

A layer of organic matter 3 or 4 inches deep, worked into the soil a shovel's depth, is usually adequate. Since different types of organic matter work and decompose at different rates in the soil, it is best to use a little of two or three kinds of organic matter than a lot of just one.

Soil testing provides specific recommendations for fertilizer and lime needs. Since lime lasts for several years depending on the type used, never add lime without a soil test. Many fertilizers, such as phosphorus, are best applied and mixed into soils before planting. Perennials need a balance of several nutrients, including nitrogen, phosphorous, and potash. Use a time release fertilizer such as Flower Tone, at the rate of 7 pounds per 100 square feet of bed when planting. Side dress at the rate of 5 pounds per 100 square feet in March, May and July.

## **PLANTING**

Place container-grown plants the same depth that they were grown; place dormant plants at the depth at which they grew the previous season. To encourage side root growth, make a planting hole twice as wide as deep. With bare-root perennials, spread the roots outward as well as downward. For container-grown plants, loosen encircled roots and shake some of the potting soil into the planting hole. Do not let roots dry out, especially during transplanting.

Water the plants in thoroughly to force out any air pockets and to settle the soil. Mark and label the plantings. Mulch the bed surface with pine straw or bark to keep soil from drying, crusting, and overheating in the summer, and to prevent many weed seeds from germinating.

## **CARE AND MAINTENANCE**

If you do not mulch your plants, use shallow cultivation in the spring and early summer to break and aerate compacted soils. Early in the season, stake tall plants with wire stands or bamboo canes. Use care to avoid root damage. In the fall, cut the old plant stalks to the ground after the leaves have fallen, and mulch to protect crowns and roots from the harsh extremes of our mild weather followed by sudden cold spells. Remove any winter annual weeds that may have germinated before applying mulch. Fall is also a good time to divide many plants that may be encroaching on one another.

## **HARDY PERENNIALS**

### **Selected Herbaceous Perennials**

The following are some of the most popular and dependable perennials. Try a few each year, and soon you will enjoy a nice collection of hardy plants. As they grow and multiply, divide and share with other gardeners for more variety. Try others as your confidence grows. (Note: Names are those generally used in the nursery trade and garden books.)

**YARROW** *Achillea filipendulina* or *millefolium* - Spring to summer, grows 1-3ft. Fernlike winter foliage, flat round heads of spring and summer flowers; excellent cut flowers; good companion to daylilies; pink or white cultivars popular, 'Coronation Gold' suffers on Gulf Coast from heat and humidity.

**BANANA** *Musa acuminata* - Foliage 10-15ft. Foliage giant; trunk needs mulch protection in winter.

**BUTTERFLY LILY** (*ginger lily*). *Hedychium coronarium* - Late summer and fall. 4-6ft bamboo-like summer foliage; pure white, fragrant flowers; rhizomes edible as a mild ginger; mulch in winter.

**CANNA** *Canna generalis* - Summer, grows 3-7ft. Dependable summer flowers; coarse foliage; tolerates both very dry and very wet soils; dwarf forms popular for landscaping; insects are a problem on foliage, but easily controlled; pruning forces new growth.

**CHIVES and GARLIC CHIVES** *Allium schoenoprasum* - Spring. grows 1-2ft. Edible flowering members of onion family; winter foliage.

**COREOPSIS** *Coreopsis lanceolata* - Spring and summer, grows 2-3ft. Several forms include spring bloomers for cutflowers and invasive, low-growing summer bloomers ('Moonbeam', 'Zargreb' with ferny foliage).

**DAYLILY** *Hemerocallis* - Summer, grows 1-4ft. Very popular clump-former with stems of large flowers; tolerates wide range of soils except wet; many improved varieties.

**ELEPHANT EAR** *Alocasia cucullata* - Foliage 3-4ft. Favorite large-leaf foliage plant; corms edible; may be invasive; many other species and hybrids available.

**FERNS** - Foliage 1-5ft. Many kinds, mostly shade; Divide and transplant in winter.

**FOUR-O'CLOCKS** *Mirabilis jalapa* - Spring to fall, grows 1-3ft. Fragrant evening bloomer; easy and fast from seed; tolerant of every poor soils; good for hummingbirds.

**HIBISCUS** (rose mallow) *Hibiscus moscheutos* - Summer and fall, grows 3-5ft. Several hardy varieties; do not confuse with Chinese hibiscus; tall plants, 'Disco Belle' series have dinner-plate-sized flowers; insects a problem on foliage.

**IRIS** *Iris* sp. - Spring, grows 2-5ft. Louisiana iris thrives in wet soils; Bearded iris popular, but often rots in heavy soils or if planted deep; Siberian iris more dependable in central and north Mississippi; Dwarf crested iris is a shade-loving groundcover.

**LANTANA** *Lantana camara* - Spring to fall, grows 2-4ft. Long-blooming butterfly plant; drought tolerant; attractive berries poisonous; new cultivars may not be hardy in the north.

**LIATRIS** (blazing star) *Liatris spicata* - Summer, grows 2-3ft. Outstanding native with tall spikes of lavender flowers that bloom from top down; great cut flower.

**MONARDA** (bee balm) *Monarda didyma* - Summer, grows 2-3ft. Native to lightly-shaded moist sites; flowers used for herbal tea; good butterfly plant.

**PHLOX** *Phlox* sp. - Spring, grows 1-3ft. Most kinds native; early spring 'Thrift'; (*P. subulata*) good for rock gardens and edging; "wild sweet Williams" (*P. divaricata*) good for ground cover; "summer phlox" (*P. paniculata*) taller cut flower (suffers from mildew).

**PURPLE CONE FLOWER** *Echinacea purpurea* - Summer, grows 2-4ft. Native summer cut flower; attractive seedheads).

**BLACK EYE SUSAN'S** *Rudbeckia fulgida* or *hirta* - Summer, grows 2-4ft. Traditional native wildflower; *R. hirta* is a short-lived spring perennial; reseeds readily; *R. fulgida* 'Goldstrum' is a more dependable, spreading groundcover with many mid-summer flowers on stiff stems. Winter foliage.

**SALVIA** *Salvia* sp. - Summer, grows 3-4ft. Several hardy species and cultivars (*S. greggii*, *S. farinacea*, *S. guaranitica*), mostly blue cut flowers on spikes.

**SEDIUM** or *spectabile* - Spring or summer, grows 10-18 inches. Several hardy species include cascading *S. acre* with yellow spring flowers, and *S. spectabile* ('Autumn Joy') or house leek; very hardy, easy to root or divide; excellent outdoor pot plants.

**STOKE'S ASTER** *Stokesia laevis* - Spring, grows 18-24inches Native, low-growing clump-former with large blue aster-like flowers; tolerates wet soils.

**VERBENA** *Verbena x hybrida* - Spring to Summer, grows 1-2ft. Spreading ground covers for sunny, dry areas; garden verbenas are propagated from cuttings, not seed like the annual species; *V. rigida* and *V. tenuisecta* (moss verbenas) are wild along roadsides and are too invasive for most gardens, but do best in very poor soils; prune in summer to control mites.

**VIOLETS** *Viola williamsii* - Late winter and spring, grows 6-10 inches. Woodland natives that also grow in full sun; May become weedy in lawns: winter flowers edible.