



William T. Kemper Center for Home Gardening

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Landscaping with Perennials

The term “perennial” generally speaking, refers to a type of plant that once planted, will live for many years. This broad definition covers bulbs, woody trees and shrubs, cacti, succulents, grasses, ferns, some herbs, and many groundcovers. The popular gardening definition of a perennial, however, refers to those plants which are non-woody, have a root system that lives through the winter from which leaves emerge in the spring and die back to the ground in the fall. Plants of this type are more specifically called herbaceous perennials.

The popularity of herbaceous perennials has risen in recent times because they offer a wide variety of forms and sizes, colors and textures and are relatively long-lived. Of particular significance is the fact that they generally fall into the low to moderate maintenance category which many gardeners today value due to limited resources and time.

There are hundreds of perennials to choose from and they offer the gardener a good deal of versatility for all areas of the landscape. You can select plants which grow well in wet and dry sites; full sun to shade; deep, fertile to shallow, poor soils. Additionally, many will solve the problems of difficult-to-manage areas like steep embankments, hillsides and rocky sites.

History of Perennials

The first and most popular period for growing herbaceous perennials was in the later part of the 1800s and early 1900s. At this time, perennials were being used in Europe as border plants outlining naturalized woodland garden areas. Later, border perennials were replaced by seasonal flowering annual plants which were changed out to give continuous color throughout the season.

The appearance of the perennial garden first took shape as a planting against courtyard walls and buildings. Tall plants were placed in the back and scaled forward with short plants in the front. Later, the idea of planting a perennial garden as an island became popular. Tall perennials were planted in the center and shorter selections towards the edge. This allowed a circular view of all plants in the garden whereas in beds planted against a wall, plants were out of view in the back and difficult to get to for maintenance.

The planting scheme for perennial beds today is mixed. Limited space and unlimited interest in planting a diversity of plants generally has promoted the idea of establishing mixed beds of annuals, perennials, trees and shrubs. Coupled with the idea of planting gardens with low maintenance requirements and continuous bloom, cultivar and hybrid perennials are appearing on the market which have few pest problems, do not require pruning, demand little water and tolerate more shade.

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Before making the plant selections for a perennial garden, it is always wise to sketch a plan showing existing plant materials you wish to retain, determining the focal points of interest in the garden, committing to a certain style and choosing the type of display. Following these four procedural steps will prevent you from just creating a collection of plants instead of an organized garden with eye-catching appeal. The most frequent mistake comes from establishing a garden with too many colors, sizes, textures and shapes. The answer is to plan it out and keep it simple.

Step 1: Sketching the Plan

Measure out the existing area and make a scaled drawing on a sheet of grid paper using 1/4 of an inch equal to 1 or 2 feet. Determine which plants you wish to remove and which to keep. Also note physical structures like fences, compost bins, trellises, walls and buildings. Roughly measure and plot all physical elements as if viewed from above. In the case of trees and shrubs or hedges, outline their foliage spread so that an idea of how much shade they cast is known.

In the process of creating this survey, note the soil types, slopes, which way the water will drain, areas with 6 or more hours of full sun, full shade areas and existing turfgrass.

Step 2: Focal Points of Interest

You will wish to hide some elements in a landscape such as air conditioners, fence anchors, storage sheds and work areas. Other aspects of the landscape you may wish to emphasize include water features, an attractive brick wall, trellis, window, porch or patio. Certain specimen plants that have unique form, color or texture should be exposed and featured. Decide on what points of interest are important and include them on the plan. The simplest way to proceed is to imagine giving a guided tour of the landscape to a friend. Ask yourself what you would like to point out as unique to this garden area and what time of the year it would be at its best.

Step 3: Style

The two different styles from which to choose are informal and formal. The informal style follows the natural flow of the landscape with curved lines and soft, sweeping edges. It does not focus on symmetry but, there is a balance created by the horizontal and vertical lines of the plant materials and physical features in the area. This style works very well for landscapes with slopes, curved paths and mature specimen plants which will be retained. A more formal style follows the creation of straighter lines and geometric patterns. This is often selected where property lines are linear and distinct or where houses are positioned squarely on the property relative to street access and view. The style of house also may determine which way you decide to proceed. Center entrance homes are more formal than side entrance; two story more than single as a general rule.

Step 4: Display Type

There are many ways to display perennials, however, you may wish to consider these three; 1) border beds, 2) island beds or 3) naturalized areas.

The border bed is typically set up against a wall, walkway, path or fence. It focuses on plants according to height with the tallest plant material in the back and shorter ones in the front. The border should not be deeper than about 6 feet so that easy access is maintained. If larger and/or positioned against a fence or wall, a path should be constructed to give access and allow air circulation. The latter is important in creating good air flow to reduce the chance of disease infection where moisture stays for long periods.

The island bed or center garden works well for large landscapes where there exists an uninterrupted area of lawn or open space. This style has the advantage in being viewed from all sides and providing easy access for pruning, watering, fertilization and weed control. It also presents better air circulation to evaporate moisture lessening disease problems.

A naturalized perennial bed is one in which plants are established in an area of native plants. This could be a woodland garden, prairie, natural stream bed or pond. Commonly, gardeners will incorporate perennials as part of a groundcover display of ivy, pachysandra, vinca, lily-turf or lawn. Early emerging perennials work well for this purpose growing through the groundcover, establishing them before the groundcover becomes active.

Step 5: Plant Selection

After the garden area has been sketched, it is now time to consider what plant to select. First, selected plants should be matched to the soil type, light level and hardiness zone.

Soil type is difficult to evaluate for most gardeners and plant lists either rarely agree or completely lack this information. If the soil is other than a well drained, good garden loam, you should stick to plants which do best in wet soils or dry soils depending upon which one characterizes your planting area.

Light levels are either greater than 6 hours (full sun), less than 6 hours (partial shade) or complete shade (deep shade). Most plant lists will at least give you some reference to whether plants can tolerate one light condition or another.

Plant hardiness has to do mostly with how tolerant it is to cold temperatures. Hardiness zones have been mapped for the U.S. and can be generally very useful for predetermining whether a certain plant has a reasonable chance of overwintering in a particular area.

Secondly, plant selection should consider size (spread and height), form, texture and color. All four factors need careful consideration.

Size is considered important from the perspective of how big the plant will become at maturity. The height will dictate how the plant should be positioned relative to other plants. It is best to place potentially tall plants in the back of the border or center of the island bed so that they will not shade other smaller plants out. Likewise, plants which spread out broadly should be given plenty of room to grow laterally. This means that as you begin to plant, some bare spots may be apparent in gaps between plants where you expect them to grow. This can be temporarily handled with annuals, groundcovers or by overplanting, then thinning to the best plant.

The form refers to the shape of the plant like vertical, creeping or prostrate, broadly oval etc. Mixing the forms will give a pleasant effect.

The texture calls attention to the fact some plants possess a leaf structure which is heavy and coarse as opposed to light and fine. Hollyhocks have a coarse while baby's breath has a fine leaf structure. Coarse textured plants tend to dominate the garden while fine-leaved plants are easily absorbed and ignored if not positioned properly at the front.

Choosing the flower color of a plant is an individual's choice. The only thing to remember is that hot colors like red, orange and yellow tend to dominate the landscape and be picked up readily by the eye. Cooler colors like blue, green and purple will be less visible. These plants tend to go better when clumped together

in a mass. Intermixing colors can be challenging. A helpful suggestion is to work with two-color at a time. Complementary two-color schemes are; orange and blue, red and green, violet and yellow.

Bloom Sequence

Most people going to the trouble to establish a perennial bed will spend a good deal of time selecting plants in a combination which will produce flowers for the entire growing season. Perennials will vary in the length of time each will flower. You should not expect to plant a bed producing a mass of color from April through October. At best, a well planned bed will have one or more plant selections in flower at any one time.

Constructing a bloom chart will help you decide which plants to choose for this purpose. The exact times of bloom are not important because each year will be different. Bloom time may vary as much as three weeks over the years. You should expect, however, that under normal growing conditions, the sequence among plants will remain unchanged.

Perennials by Color

Blue to Purple	Pink	Red	Yellow	White
Balloon Flower	Astilbe	Astilbe	Barrenwort	Adam's Needle
Beard-tongue	Baby's breath	Avens	Basket-of-gold	Astilbe
Bellflower	Balloon Flower	Bee Balm	Blanket Flower	Baby's Breath
Blazing Star	Barrenwort	Bergenia	Barrenwort	Balloon Flower
Blue Lungwort	Beard-tongue	Blanket Flower	Columbine	Beard-tongue
Bugleweed	Bee Balm	Bleeding Heart	Daylily	Bee Balm
Catmint	Bergenia	Cardinal Flower	Delphinium	Bellflower
Columbine	Bleeding Heart	Columbine	Primrose	Bergenia
Delphinium	Blue Lungwort	Coralbells	Globe Flower	Blazing Star
False Indigo	Columbine	Pinks	Marguerite	Bleeding Heart
Fleabane	Coralbells	Daylily	Heliopsis	Bugleweed
Forget-me-not	Pinks	Peony	Hollyhock	Candytuft
Gentian	Daylily	Aster	Iris	Columbine
Globe Thistle	Peony	Hardy Geranium	Lupine	Coralbells
Aster	Gas Plant	Hollyhock	Meadow Rue	Pinks
Hardy Geranium	Aster	Lupine	Monkshood	Lityturf
Hen-and-chickens	Hardy Geranium	Maltese Cross	Mum	Delphinium
Hosta	Hollyhock	Mum	Primrose	Peony
Iris	Iris	Oriental Poppy	Senecio	Gas Plant
Jacob's Ladder	Lavender	Phlox	Stonecrop	Goatsbeard
Lavender	Lily-of-the-valley	Primrose	Tickseed	Marguerite
Lupine	Lupine	Rose Mallow	Yarrow	Aster
Meadow Rue	Mum	Self-heal	Foxglove	Hardy Geranium
Monkshood	Obedient Plant	Solomon's-seal	Loosestrife	Hen-and-chickens
Mum	Oriental Poppy	Stonecrop		Hollyhock
Salvia	Phlox	Sweet Violet		Hosta
Phlox	Primrose			Iris
Primrose	Purple Coneflower			Lily-of-the-valley
Loosestrife	Loosestrife			Lupine
Rock Cress	Valerian			Mum
Lavender	Rock Cress			Obedient Plant
Siberian Bugloss	Rose Mallow			Salvia
Speedwell	Rodgersia			Phlox
Spiderwort	Self-heal			Primrose

Stoke's Aster	Smartweed	Purple Coneflower
Sweet Violet	Soapwort	Solomon's-seal
Virginia Bluebells	Speedwell	Speedwell
	Spiderwort	Spiderwort
	Stonecrop	Stoke's Aster
	Thyme	Stonecrop
	Windflower	Sweet Violet
	Yarrow	Sweet Woodruff

Perennials as Ground Covers for Sun

Common Name	Scientific Name	Height	Color	Bloom Period
Yarrow	<i>Achillea tomentosa</i>	2-6"	yellow	June - September
Golden marguerite	<i>Anthemis nobilis</i>	2-6"	white	May - July
Rock cress	<i>Arabis</i> spp.	2-6"	white	April - June
Sea thrift	<i>Armeria</i> spp.	2-6"	red, pink, white	April - May
Purple rock cress	<i>Aubrieta</i> hybrids	2-6"	blue, purple	April - June
Draba	<i>Draba repens</i>	2-6"	yellow	April - May
Baby's breath	<i>Gypsophila repens</i>	2-6"	pink	June - August
Rupturewort	<i>Herniaria glabra</i>	2-6"	yellow	July - August
Creeping phlox	<i>Phlox subulata</i>	2-6"	blue, pink, red, white	April - June
Cinquefoil	<i>Potentilla verna nana</i>	2-6"	yellow	May - June
Soapwort	<i>Saponaria ocymoides</i>	2-6"	pink	May - June
Stonecrop	<i>Sedum</i> spp.	2-6"	variety	June - September
Speedwell	<i>Veronica prostrata</i>	2-6"	pink	May - August
Barren strawberry	<i>Waldsteinia ternata</i>	2-6"	yellow	May - June
Wormwood	<i>Artemisia</i> spp.	6-12"	grey foliage	
Leadwort	<i>Ceratostigma plumbaginoides</i>	6-12"	blue	August - October
Candytuft	<i>Iberis sempervirens</i>	6-12"	white	April - June
Lamb's ear	<i>Stachys</i> spp.	6-12"	pink, purple	June - July
Speedwell	<i>Veronica</i> spp.	6-12"	variety	May - August
Geranium	<i>Geranium sanguineum</i>	6-12"	pink	June - August
Snow-in-summer	<i>Cerastium tomentosum</i>	6-12"	white	May - June
Winter creeper	<i>Euonymus</i> spp.	2-18"	evergreen	

Perennials as Ground Covers for Shade

Common Name	Scientific Name	Height	Color	Bloom Period
Lily-of-the-valley	<i>Convallaria majalis</i>	2-6"	white, pink	May - June
Hosta	<i>Hosta</i> spp.	6-12"	white	July - September
Crested iris	<i>Iris cristata</i>	2-6"	blue	April - May
Lysimachia	<i>Lysimachia nuinmularia</i> var. <i>aura</i>	2-6"	yellow	May - June
Mazus	<i>Mazus reptans</i>	2-6"	white, purple	May - September
Mondo grass	<i>Ophiopogon</i> spp.	2-10"	white, purple	August- September
Rockfoil	<i>Saxifraga stolonifera</i>	2-6"	white	May - July
Barren strawberry	<i>Waldsteinia ternata</i>	2-6"	yellow	May - June
Bishop's weed	<i>Aegopodium</i>	6-12"	white	May - June
Sweet woodruff	<i>Galium odoratum</i>	6-12"	white	May - June
Hosta	<i>Hosta</i> spp.	6-12"	white, purple	August- September

Astilbe	<i>Astilbe</i> spp.	12-24"	variety	May - August
Ivy	<i>Hedera helix</i>	6-12"	evergreen	
Pachysandra	<i>Pachysandra terminalis</i>	6-12"	evergreen	
Vinca	<i>Vinca minor</i>	6-12"	blue, white, purple	April - June
Lamium	<i>Lamium</i> spp.	6-12"	pink, yellow, white	June - August
Lilyturf	<i>Liriope spicata</i>	12-24"	pink	July - September