

PERENNIAL GARDENING BASICS

Perennial gardens are perfect for gardeners of all levels and interests. Here are some tips for planning, planting and maintaining a garden for year-round enjoyment.



Perennial

1. Present at all seasons of the year
2. Persisting for several years usually with new herbaceous growth from a perennating part

As the definition indicates, perennials are plants that come back year after year unlike annuals, which are generally replaced each year. That's great news for most of us who have busy lives and gravitate toward plants that require little maintenance in exchange for a show of color in the garden. There are perennials for just about every garden environment and a rainbow of colors from which to choose. We'll start with some suggestions for getting started on a perennial garden and then discuss some general maintenance.

Getting Started

Chances are you are not starting from scratch and already have some trees, shrubs and possibly existing perennials in place. Feel free to work within existing gardens, but be sure to clean them up first. If your gardens require extreme trimming or removal, it's a good idea to contact a professional for advice and service.

To begin, all gardens need a focal point to help draw the eye and give the garden an orderly look. Your focal point is completely up to you and can be anything from a spectacular specimen plant to a unique sculpture. Once you have this in place, it's time to think

about a color scheme. Try to pick three or four colors to create a scheme. If you spend a lot of time entertaining outside, it might be fun to match outdoor furniture and décor.

Now it's time to get your hands dirty. Preparing the garden bed is as important as choosing the plants. Most common perennials prefer soil with a pH of 5.5 to 6.5, but as always, there are exceptions. Be sure to read plant descriptions to learn about special light and pH requirements they might have. Be sure to rejuvenate existing soils with amendments like manure, humus or compost. This will help kick start new plants and keep them healthy as they establish.

Placing Plants

Most perennial gardens include plants in clumps or blocks—three or more of the same plant grouped together. Creating the masses of color that make perennial borders so attractive means you need to plant clumps in a few different areas in each garden bed. Feel free to repeat clumps of varieties throughout your gardens. Be sure to allow plenty of room for expansion. Every plant grows differently so consult labels for spacing between plants. Space clumps further apart—about two or three feet.

When choosing varieties, it's vitally important to understand the area where you will plant them. Most perennials thrive in full sun, but there are options for shade, as well. And because perennials are long-term plants, thinking long term is necessary. If your garden is in an area with newly established trees, consider how fast they will grow and how much shade they will provide down the road. If you are planning your garden based on a color



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scheme, pick the basic colors but be open to changing varieties based on your garden environment.

Filling Gaps

Of course, a new perennial garden will not be bursting with plants. Perennials take about three years to fill in and reach optimum size. A great way to fill some gaps without spending a fortune is with annuals, which help to add color and interest while your perennials mature. Even existing perennial gardens go through periods of the year when few plants are in bloom.

Maintaining Beauty

One of the main reasons gardeners of all skill levels love perennial gardens is that they require less maintenance than other alternatives like vegetables, roses and even lawns. They do, however, need regular care and attention for peak performance and health. But before you groan about the work required, remember gardening is a great form of exercise, and light gardening can burn as many as 300 calories an hour—similar to a moderate walk or a game of golf. Here are some weekly and seasonal perennial garden duties to add to your “workout.”

Weekly

First of all, if rainfall is intermittent, you will need to water your perennial garden. Check below the top two or three inches of soil and water if dry. Try to avoid wetting plant leaves during the day to prevent the spread of some plant diseases.

Spend some time walking through your perennial gardens removing spent flowers and damaged leaves by hand or with a hand pruner. Also, inspect for insects, diseases and signs of animal damage. Watch for leaves with holes or ragged edges; discolored or spotted leaves; chewed flowers or buds; or damaged stems. Once you have spotted a problem, your best move is to take the damaged part of the plant to your favorite garden center for a positive identification. They will also be able to recom-

Stephanie’s Three Staples

World-renowned perennial expert Stephanie Cohen suggests a few plants perfect for any perennial garden. An additional benefit provided by these three winners is that if you plant all of them, you will have something exciting to look at throughout the entire year.

Hellebores

Blooming beautifully beginning in late winter or early spring, there is almost an endless number of hellebores to choose from and you should have no problem finding a range of choices at your local garden center. Colors range all across the board: pink, chartreuse, green and on and on. An important added benefit is that deer do not care for hellebores. Stephanie suggests any of the hundreds of *helleborus x hybridus* Lenten Rose varieties.

Daylilies

Even the most inexperienced gardener can be successful with daylilies and most varieties bloom repeatedly from summer through fall. You should have no problem finding plants to fit your color scheme. Daylilies come in most colors, from rich vibrant red, to pink, lavender, royal purple, white and even black. Stephanie recommends *hemerocallis* Happy Returns, a yellow that blooms from May through July.

Grasses

Especially for fall and winter interest, go with ornamental grasses. This time of year, many perennial gardens are only skeletons of their summer selves, but grasses provide structure, texture and even movement to your garden. Talk to your local garden center about grasses best for your area and be sure to choose a few that will continue to stand tall all year long, not flopping over. Stephanie’s pick is *Panicum virgatum* Northwind, which grows as tall as seven feet and stands upright all winter.

mend solutions for just about anything you confront them with. If you have no luck at the garden center, contact your local cooperative extension service.

Finally, everyone’s favorite task: weeding. Use a hoe with a small, sharp blade; a weeder; or pull them by hand. The trick is to get them by the root. Remember, you can burn as many as 300 calories an hour doing light weeding. There’s your incentive.

Seasonally

Keeping your garden tidy by edging the beds will add to its beauty. For the best results, use a half-moon edger or spade. Facing your garden, push the blade straight down about three or four inches. Then simply pull the handle toward you to remove a wedge of soil. Once you edge your garden once, it’s easy to keep it looking good with minimal effort.

Fertilizing and mulching should also be done periodically throughout the year—maybe not monthly, but certainly first thing in the spring and again heading into winter. Use a slow release, granular fertilizer or natural alternative in the spring. This should feed your garden well into the summer. Fertilizer formulations specifically for perennial gardens should not be difficult to find. Mulch should be no deeper than two inches and organic materials like shredded bark should be replaced as they break down.

Cut back most perennials to within eight to 10 inches from the ground after the tops die back or leave them intact for protection against the cold. In spring, cut back all dead stems to the ground and rake out debris. If you have questions about specific varieties, ask your favorite garden center expert.

Good Luck & Have Fun

I hope you are excited to get started planning a perennial garden. It is sure to provide years of enjoyment and receive plenty of compliments from friends and neighbors, all for very little effort. 🌿

By Bill Calkins with help from the experts at the National Gardening Association, www.garden.org.