

GARDENS THAT GO BLOOM

Who wouldn't want a garden that blooms from March to November? Even better, one that keeps our visual interest throughout the year—be it flowers, berries, ferns, seed pods or ornamental grasses draped in snow.

What's your biggest obstacle to achieving a continuously blooming garden? It's your buying habits and the way you think about gardens. But we're here to change that. It's time to think about your garden as a progressional landscape, not just a bed that has a big-bang of blooms in June and fades with the heat of August.

Creating a perennial garden that blooms throughout the season means choosing plants that attract attention during different parts of the year. In short, the biggest mistake you can make is buying all your plants on Mother's Day weekend with everything ready to bloom. You haven't left room for anything else!

Picking your plants

Before you start picking out actual plants in the garden center, let's figure out what type of garden conditions you have and what sort of design you want.

Most importantly: Will you be planting in full sun (usually 6 hours or more of sun each day), shade or partial shade? Be sure the plants you choose match the sun/shade requirements. If it's a shade garden, it's okay for a spectacular fern to fill in for a blooming plant. Also take note of your soil conditions. Finally, if you really want a perennial garden with plants that come back year after year, it's imperative to choose perennials that are hardy in your area—i.e., they'll survive the winter temperatures. If you look at the USDA Zone Map of Hardiness, you'll see which Zone your region falls under, and most plant tags contain information on which Zones the variety is hardy in.

As for garden design, the possibilities are endless. Remember, there's no rule saying that you can't mix annuals, shrubs and perennials; in fact, annuals are a great way to boost your full-season color impact. Think about whether you'd like tall plants, compact ones or a mixture.



Pam Duthie

Core group: The first thing you want to do is start with a core group of plants. Keeping the above information in mind, begin collecting a grouping of perennials that all have a minimum bloom window of two months. Some might bloom from May to June, such as iris, hardy geranium and peony. Others, such as asters, will go from September to October. Most likely, as you gather these core plants, you'll find that many of their bloom times overlap. For example, you might combine asters with rudbeckia Goldsturm, which generally blooms from July to September.

Fillers: Once you've assembled a core group of perennials, we can start to look for gaps where color may be lacking, for complementary plants and for plants that will extend the season a bit more. Some of these perennials may have shorter bloom



Each issue, *Green Profit* organizes a ready-made class on livegood and hardgood topics in the form of a magazine page you can tear out, even giving it to customers who want questions answered, myths debunked and a reason to be in a garden environment, regardless of the season. You provide the customers and example products; we'll do the rest.

times, others may provide the foliage and texture that'll round out your design (see below). Spring-blooming bulbs are a great way to provide that first burst of color, be it the yellow of daffodils, the purple of a hyacinth or the bold hues of a cluster of tulips.

More than blooms: While we keep mentioning “continuous blooming” and color, we'd stress that you can and should draw attention to a garden and fill it out with other elements, as well. In fact, foliage in general acts as a crucial blending element in every garden. Variegated (multicolored) foliage (many hostas, for instance), ferns, ornamental grasses and foliage can provide texture and drama. Depending on the plant you choose, it may form a clump, spread out or even cascade down; and the foliage may provide its own color scheme as well as different textures—from frost-like artemisia to lace-like ferns. Plus, when the cold months arrive, seed heads, evergreens, and even the shapes of plants you haven't trimmed back for the winter can provide interest. When to buy: Let's be honest, most customers buy plants that are in bloom. So, if you really want a landscape that's in color throughout the seasons, you have two choices. **1.** Load up in the spring and buy green plants that aren't yet flowering.

Finders, Keepers

A quick note on perennial names: Most perennials have a botanical name (such as *Buddleia davidii*), a variety or cultivar name (such as 'Royal Red'), and one or more common names (such as butterfly bush), which may vary by region. If you don't find a perennial you're looking for, ask. The plant may just be listed under a different name.

2. Visit the garden center every two weeks or so, see what's in bloom, buy it then, and plant your garden in stages.

Take home gardening tips

- It's important to pay attention to spacing requirements for each plant; most plant labels will tell you how far apart to plant them and/or how tall/wide the plant grows. For instance, tall plants generally go in the back, shorter ones in the front of a garden.
- Perennials are fairly forgiving plants. If a plant starts crowding out another or if you don't like the placement, feel free to move or divide the plant. Share them with friends!
- Plants like water, even when the temperatures drop. They need about 1 in. per week, regardless of cool fall weather. So if the rain isn't providing enough, make sure you water through the fall. And, if you've just planted your garden, pay extra attention to keeping it watered so the plants can get their roots established.
- Fertilize your gardens three times each season: in early May, in early June and again in early August. Don't fertilize after August 16 as it can affect the plants going into dormancy.
- Once the cold spells come, most of your perennials' leaves will begin to brown, yellow and drop off—meaning they're going dormant. This signals that you can now cut back the plants right down to the clump of leaves at the base (you can also do it next spring, if you're feeling a bit lazy in the fall). Do NOT cut back your evergreens.
- Compost will do wonders for your soil. One of the best ways is to apply a “bed sheet” of compost 3 to 6 in. deep over your garden around Thanksgiving, after you've cut back plants. Leaves that you've shredded twice with a lawnmower work well. 🍃



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—by Jennifer Duffield White, with special thanks to Pam Duthie, author of *Continuous Bloom* and *Continuous Color*. Pam owns *The Gifted Gardener*, a landscape design and consulting firm that specializes in perennials, and she lectures widely on gardening. Her books are available at www.ballbookshelf.com.