

Garden Center Guides



Herbaceous perennials are nonwoody plants that live two or more years. The plant dies to the ground in the winter and returns each spring with new growth from the roots. Unlike annuals

that must be planted every spring and bloom until frost, perennials return to have a bloom season that may last from two to six weeks. Perennials are a major component in the landscape, with a variety of sizes, bloom periods, colors, and flower and plant structures.

Planting

Perennials require regular maintenance and need to be placed with a purpose in the landscape. A perennial bed needs to be planned for adequate light and space. Generally, perennials do best in well-drained, fertile soil. Heavy, wet soils inhibit performance and decrease winter hardiness. Raising the bed and amending the soil with peatmoss or compost will improve soil drainage. Most perennial plants prefer organic, slightly acidic (pH 6.5-7) soil.

Perennials may be purchased either bare root or container grown. Container-grown plants can be planted throughout the growing season, but usually are planted in the spring. If the container plant has been grown in a greenhouse, it is best to wait until the danger of frost has passed because the plant will be tender and not acclimated to freezing conditions. If grown outdoors, the plants can be planted as soon as the ground can be worked. Bare-root plants should be planted as soon as possible. Prevent the roots from drying by soaking them in water, wrapping the roots in plastic and storing in a cool area. They may be stored for only a short time. Spread the roots when planting and settle soil firmly around the roots. As you plant, water the division to settle the soil. Plant perennials at the same depth as they were previously grown.

Perennials

Routine maintenance of perennial plants will encourage optimum performance. Water well at the time of planting and continue to water new plants with 1 inch of water per week. For established plants, apply water to the soil as needed. Watering deeply and less frequently promotes deeper rooting that reduces the need for supplemental moisture. Fertilize new plants with a starter fertilizer, then feed annually with a slow-release fertilizer. To know what nutrients the soil needs, use a soil fertility test.

Care

As perennials reach one-third of mature size, pinch off plant tips to promote blooms and form a bushier plant. (Plants similar to hosta and daylilies that form from the crown and are not branched are exceptions.) When the perennial blooms, cut off old blooms slightly below the flower head. This practice, called “deadheading,” will prolong the blooming period and improve the plant’s appearance. The plant will often rebloom with smaller flowers.

Taller perennials in a windy area may need staking. Delphiniums, baby’s breath, peonies, asters and daylilies have a tendency to lay over. Stake the plant early so growing foliage can hide the stake. Use a stake two-thirds the height of the mature plant and place near the stem. Be careful not to damage the root. The plant can be tied to the stake as it grows. Wire perennial rings also can be used to support the plants, but must be placed early in the growing season.

Mulch emerging plants with 2 inches of organic mulch to conserve moisture, deter weed growth and insulate the ground. Keep mulch away from plant crowns to reduce the chance of fungal diseases on plant crowns or fleshy stems. Remove garden debris in the fall. Perennials are not notorious for disease and insect problems but may be affected by aphids and thrips, molds, mildew, leaf spots and rust. Good cultural maintenance can prevent such diseases. Perennial tops can be left until spring because they insulate the plant,

catch snow and provide winter beauty and seeds for birds. Tender crowns may need an application of loose mulch late in the fall to prevent the soil from heaving with repeated freezes and thaws. Do not use leaves or grass clippings that compact around the plant. Winter mulch can be removed safely in mid-March.

Most perennials need routine division every three years to maintain plant vigor. Peonies and baby's breath prefer to be left undisturbed. Midsummer bloomers, such as daylilies, are best divided in early spring. Perennials that bloom in the spring should be divided in late summer or early fall. To divide, cut off the plant, leaving about 6 inches of the top. Dig around the plant with a garden fork and lift the plant from underneath the crown. Shake off and rinse to remove excess soil. Divisions from fibrous rooted plants should be taken from the perimeter of the plant where growth is young and more vigorous. Divide solid crown plants with a sharp, sterile knife or spade. Be sure each division has three

to five bud eyes for new shoot production. Protect the divisions from heat and sun. Do not allow roots to dry out. Replant the new divisions as soon as possible in a prepared site. Be careful to replant at the proper depth. Planting too deep may prevent blooming or cause the division to rot. Water well.

Examples of perennials that prefer shade are hosta, astilbe, coralbells, bleeding heart, lily of the valley and columbine. Sun-loving perennial gardens include coneflower, hardy salvia, veronica, statice, baby's breath, phlox, soapwort, pin-cushion flower, coreopsis and sedum.

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