

Although very colorful and most rewarding, annual flowers live for only one season and die. Growing annual flowers involves considerable yearly expense. An annual's greatest attribute is that it continues to bloom throughout the growing season, especially if one is disciplined and deadheads.

The Beauty of Perennials



On the other hand, perennial flowers live and bloom for two or more years. Generally, we purchase perennials only once, and if properly cared for, they can be divided in future years, thus increasing their numbers. When freezing temperatures arrive, herbaceous perennials (soft stems versus woody stems) die to the crown yet remain viable through the winter months.

Unlike annuals, perennials are capable of rejuvenating new stems, leaves and flowers the following growing season. Unfortunately, very few perennials bloom all summer long.

I personally enjoy growing both annuals and perennials, but today I wish to focus attention on basic perennial management.

Before one purchases or plants any perennial, it is imperative that one does his or her homework —learning as much as one can about the perennial, its growing habits, and its cultural care.

It is extremely important to select a planting site that fits the intended purpose and the mature size of the plant. Most perennials are purchased as small, immature plants. Being knowledgeable about their mature size is an integral part of landscape design. Not only do perennials generally require more space than annuals, but they also require additional space to provide access for their maintenance.

Since perennials will be growing in the same space for a considerable number of years, proper bed preparation is necessary before planting. It is important that existing plant material be removed from the area, either chemically or mechanically. Till the soil surface and incorporate organic matter and/ or fertilizer. Spring and fall are the best times to plant perennials.

When planting, handle the plant by the root ball and place in the soil with the crown slightly above the surrounding soil or at least at the same depth. Choose to do your planting on a cool, cloudy day or in the early evening hours.

After planting, immediately water. Even drought-tolerant perennials need adequate water during their establishment. Throughout the growing season, continue to water. Thoroughly wet the top six-to-eight inches of soil by watering slowly. Allow the soil to dry slightly between watering. Avoid overwatering. It is usually best to water in the early morning. If possible, limit overhead watering.

Most perennials benefit from a light application of organic mulch. The mulch helps to conserve moisture and control weeds. Mulching in the fall after the ground freezes is recommended for marginal plants as well as those that were newly installed to protect the crown and to keep it from heaving during the freeze/thaw cycles.

Fertilization may be needed depending on the plant. Choose a fertilizer formulation that is based on the plant's intended purpose such as foliage or flower.

Eliminate competition from weeds. Weed control can be accomplished mechanically (pulling and cultivating), by mulching or with herbicides. Extra caution needs to be taken when using herbicides. Always follow label directions.

Once the perennial begins to bloom, remove the spent flowers. By deadheading, one is eliminating seed production and encouraging the plant to utilize its energies for other plant functions. Furthermore, deadheading perennials may promote a light re-blooming.

Most herbaceous perennials require cutting back in the fall unless they offer winter interest.

A bonus with most perennials comes from division — creating additional plants from the parent plant. Each offshoot will be genetically the same as the parent. Division also invigorates an older plant. It is best to divide in the spring or fall to avoid high stress periods. One can divide by cutting small pieces from the main plant or one can lift the entire plant out of the ground and cut into several pieces. Always replant the divisions at the original depth and treat as newly planted perennials.

Add perennials to your landscape. They provide interest and color — a lot of it, for years and without much effort or expense.