

Home & Garden Education Center



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EXTENSION

Plan for Perennials

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Herbaceous perennials, with their abundance of bloom and foliage options, are the steadfast ornaments of every home landscape. These non-woody plants grow and flower during the spring, summer, or early fall seasons only to die back to the ground with the frost. Although they may produce seeds, these plants rely on vegetative reproduction unlike annuals which reproduce primarily by seed. The different forms of vegetative reproduction structures include bulbs, rhizomes, tubers, and woody crowns. The larger root systems of perennials allow them to access water and nutrients that may be deeper in the soil making them more drought-tolerant than shallow-rooted annuals may be. Another benefit to perennials is that they will grow for many years with minimal care and do not need to be replaced every spring as annuals do. These traits make it easy to plan a garden that will provide a succession of beautiful blooms.

Site selection is an important consideration when choosing perennials. While some perennials may adapt to less than perfect sun or shade availability, they may not bloom as abundantly or vibrantly in light conditions that are not optimum for the species. Some of my favorite perennials that do well in the shade are astilbe, toad lily, and anemone. When planning your perennial garden keep in mind the mature height and width of plants, keeping those plants that are taller to the back of beds. Some lovely plants for the backdrop of a bed include Allium with its magnificent globe flower heads, the stately lupine, and the delicate bleeding heart. Bleeding heart in particular is well suited to the rear of a bed as its foliage will die back by mid-summer.

Lupine image by S. Pelton

Before any planting, a soil test will determine if any soil amendments may be needed and will also give fertilizer recommendations. It's always best to select species for the soil conditions that are present rather than to amend soils for a particular plant, native species in particular are always the most likely to thrive.



Regular watering is essential as with most plants. Perennials require about an inch of water at least once a week to keep plant foliage looking fresh and to encourage blooms. Even drought tolerant species need water to get established and also during long dry spells. Check to see that plants are getting adequate water by either digging down after watering to see how deep the water has penetrated the soil or set out a container and water until the one inch of water is collected. Avoid overwatering established perennials to promote deeper rooting.

Mulching your perennial plantings will keep weeds down and also decrease evaporation as soil under mulched

plants will stay retain moisture. Any organic material can serve as a mulch but fine-textured shredded bark, cocoa bean hulls or buckwheat hulls may be more in keeping with the scale of smaller perennials like lily of the valley. Usually only an inch or so of mulch is necessary around perennials. If peonies are mulched during the growing season it should be removed before the winter.

In general, fertilizers formulated for flowering plants would contain amounts of nitrogen, N, (the first number in a fertilizer ratio) less than or equal to the amounts of phosphorus, P, (the second number in the ratio) as phosphorus encourages flowering. A 10-10-10 or 5-10-5 formula would be appropriate. Too much nitrogen will stimulate green leafy growth at the expense of flower production but is beneficial to perennials such as hosta that are grown for more for their lovely foliage than their flowers.



Perennials will benefit from division every 3 to 4 years. For spring-blooming perennials like bleeding heart or phlox, division can be done in the early spring or after flowering. Iris should be divided in late July or August after they have finished blooming. They are easily dug up, can be divided with a shovel or a sharp knife, and then replanted at the soil surface. Take care not to let the rhizomes dry out before replanting. If perennials are being divided after they have bloomed the foliage may be cut back to a 6" height which will make the process easier. Newly divided plants should be watered immediately after re-planting and a layer of mulch will help to retain moisture.

Bleeding heart image by S. Pelton

Don't forget about the pollinators when planning your perennial beds. Choosing plants that will provide a succession of flowers throughout the season, especially in the early spring before most plants are in bloom, will benefit bees and other insects. The National Pollinator Garden Network has issued a challenge to all gardeners to add three pollinator-friendly plants to their yards this year. By doing this you can bring color and interest to your landscape, from snowdrops and crocuses in March to asters and hyssop in October, all while helping the pollinators.

If you have questions about perennial care or on other gardening topics, feel free to contact us, toll-free, at the UConn Home & Garden Education Center at (877) 486-6271, visit our website at www.ladybug.uconn.edu or contact your local Cooperative Extension center.